



Department  
for Transport

# **Review of Enhanced Partnerships: Report**

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# Executive summary

Improving bus services is a key part of this government's growth mission. We are determined to deliver better services, grow passenger numbers and drive opportunity to under-served regions.

As part of our plan for better buses, the Government has conducted a review into the effectiveness of Enhanced Partnerships (EPs), with the aim to identify areas where EPs can be improved and strengthened to deliver a better minimum standard of bus services across the country.

## Key Findings

We found EPs are largely effective, and stakeholders generally view them positively. In our survey of stakeholders including Local Transport Authorities (LTAs) and bus operators (further details of which are provided in Annex A), 96% of respondents believed EPs have met, partially met or exceeded their objective of facilitating co-operation between LTAs and bus operators to achieve the objectives in their Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIPs).

This is supported by the latest [passenger survey results from Transport Focus](#), which show improvements in passenger satisfaction in 2024 compared to 2023 – from 80% to 83% satisfaction in England outside London. The vast majority of LTAs covered have EPs in place. Improvements can be attributed to several factors, including funding provided through the BSIP programme, but the results demonstrate that alongside the right investment, EPs can deliver real improvements for passengers.

We found good EPs shared four common features. They were:

- passenger-focused
- collaborative
- accountable
- ambitious

However, EPs are not currently delivering effectively everywhere. We found some EPs were less developed than others, and support is needed to bring those EPs up to a suitable standard.

Overall, EPs are still a new model of bus delivery, with most having been made in the past three years. Many are still establishing and some aspects remain untested, but many are already delivering improvements for passengers.

With the right support and funding available, they are a model that can successfully deliver better services and grow passenger numbers.

## Summary of commitments

1. We have implemented new legislative measures to strengthen EPs through the Bus Services Act 2025, including a new measure to better protect socially necessary local bus services.
2. We will set new minimum standards for EPs as a condition of future bus grant funding.
3. We will work with the sector to develop a model data sharing agreement, to better facilitate information sharing between LTAs and operators.
4. We will promote transparency and accountability by requiring all EPs to participate in Transport Focus passenger satisfaction surveys, with results published.
5. We will work with the traffic commissioners to ensure that there is understanding and effective implementation of the framework in relation to sanctions for EPs and provide the necessary clarity and accountability to all parties.
6. We will update EP Guidance to ensure it is user-friendly and provide necessary clarity to LTAs and operators. Through the Guidance, we will also clarify that the requirement to have a BSIP may be delivered through an EP Plan - reducing the need for duplication.
7. We will publish an EP Manual, identifying and sharing examples of good practice in EPs.
8. We will work with the Bus Centre of Excellence to identify capability gaps and ways to support EPs.

# Introduction

## Background

Britain needs a modern transport network to deliver Government's missions to kickstart economic growth and break down barriers to opportunity. Buses are the most popular form of public transport and are the lifeblood of our communities, providing access to jobs, education and vital local services, and helping to prevent isolation. However, local bus services are not consistently delivering for communities. Improving our bus services will support the missions by connecting people to a greater breadth of work, education and social opportunities. It also supports Government's environmental goals around air quality and decarbonisation by helping to take cars off the road and through the transition to zero-emission buses.

To deliver these missions, we want to ensure bus services reflect the needs of the communities that rely on them. That's why we are empowering local leaders to choose the model that works best in their area, whether that be franchising, local authority owned bus companies, or strengthened Enhanced Partnerships with private operators.

An Enhanced Partnership (EP) is a statutory partnership between one or more Local Transport Authorities (LTAs) and their local bus operators, established by the Bus Services Act 2017. It outlines how they will work together to deliver improvements to bus services in their area.

An EP is formed in two parts: an EP Plan, which sets the vision of the improvements to bus services that the EP is aiming to deliver, and an EP scheme, which sets out the rules that bus operators must follow and the actions that LTAs and operators must take to deliver the vision in the EP Plan. Once made, the EP scheme becomes a legally binding document. LTAs and all operators running local bus services in the EP area are accountable for meeting those obligations.

## Purpose of the review

The aims of the EP Review ('the review') were to:

- assess the effectiveness of existing EPs

- identify where EPs can be improved and strengthened to deliver a higher minimum standard of bus services in every part of the country

## How the review was completed

The review was undertaken in two phases. Phase 1 of the Review was primarily carried out between September 2024 and November 2024 and focused on identifying legislative measures for inclusion in the Bus Services Act 2025. Phase 2 looked more widely at non-legislative measures and aimed to identify where EPs can be strengthened to deliver a higher minimum standard of bus services across the country.

A range of evidence informed the review, including extensive stakeholder engagement, Transport Focus data on passenger satisfaction, and data on the delivery of BSIP interventions to date.

Stakeholder views were gathered through:

- an external steering group with industry, LTA and passenger representatives
- a stakeholder survey, to which over 70 organisations responded
- a series of roundtable events for those involved directly in EPs, including an event in Leeds on 2 April, Birmingham on 9 April, and a virtual event on 9 June 2025
- a series of visits to EPs, including observing EP board meetings and forums
- Details of the outputs of the stakeholder survey and EP review events can be found in Annex A.

## What good looks like

Throughout the review we have seen many examples of successful EPs, where operators and LTAs are working in partnership to deliver improvements that deliver improved outcomes, including growing patronage and increasing passenger satisfaction.

In future, the Department is moving towards a system of measuring performance of LTAs through an Outcomes Framework approach. This will be piloted with all LTAs in 2025/26. While the framework primarily evaluates LTA performance, bus operators in Enhanced Partnership areas will play a crucial role in delivering improved passenger outcomes. The metrics within the Outcomes Framework will therefore serve as valuable benchmarks to assess the effectiveness of Enhanced Partnerships, providing a consistent methodology to measure service improvements and hold all stakeholders accountable for delivering better public transport services.

Through our engagement with EPs, we identified four key pillars which are common across successful EPs:

- passenger-focused
- collaborative
- accountable
- ambitious

These four pillars were tested with stakeholders working in EPs at events in Leeds, Birmingham and online.

### Passenger-Focused

The primary function of an EP is to deliver improvements for passengers. The best EPs focus on the measures that passengers care most about in their area. They deliver inclusively for all passengers, including those with disabilities. Research from Transport Focus shows that the most important factor for passenger satisfaction is timeliness, and many EPs supplemented this with surveys in their areas to find out what passengers' priorities were locally.

Examples of good practice include the implementation of a passenger charter, engagement with representative groups through forums (such as in Nottinghamshire and Portsmouth); easily accessible information relating to bus services and a multi-operator ticketing offer (for example in Stoke-on-Trent); and consulting with accessibility groups. In Brighton & Hove, their Better Buses for All programme has been a success that they aim to roll out across all Brighton buses. Similarly, Blackpool conducted case studies on accessibility, and one of their operators has since purchased new, high-quality buses with a focus on accessibility.

## Collaborative

Open dialogue and honesty between partners are vital for success. A collaborative EP is one that values open communication and strong partnership working, both between LTAs and operators, but also between the EP and their external partners, such as neighbouring EPs, schools and universities, sporting venues, the NHS, rail operators and local charities.

West Northamptonshire host a twice-yearly stakeholder forum to bring their partners together to work towards initiatives aiming to increase patronage. Portsmouth were the winners of the 'Partnership for Excellence' award at the 2024 UK Bus Awards for their excellent partnership working.

Partnerships across transport modes are also important: in Plymouth, the rail operator sits on the EP board, and Shropshire and the West Midlands embed community transport in their EP structures.

## Accountable

Good EPs are transparent with partners and the public on spending and progress on targets or key performance indicators. They have a clear vision for their shared objectives, hold each other accountable for realistic delivery timelines and agree clear mechanisms to resolve differences. A good EP has clarity over the responsibilities of each partner. Leicester was highlighted as a good example, with clear outputs and responsibilities set out in the EP.

Feedback from some stakeholders, including CPT, suggested that independent Chairs of EP Boards tended to work well to hold both parties to account.

## Ambitious

EPs need a clear, strong vision to focus on interventions that will make the most difference to passengers, even when these are not the most straightforward to deliver. Setting ambitious targets and celebrating milestones support the momentum of delivery.

EP successes were also linked to the political support that bus reform receives within the LTA. Stakeholders were able to cite examples of how strong political will (such as on Devon County Council's EP Board, which is chaired by their Cabinet member) meant progress for buses was more highly prioritised.

Operators within EPs frequently discussed the importance of ambitious bus priority schemes, such as Oxfordshire County Council's Cherwell Street bus lane scheme and West Sussex's Manor Royal bus lane extension, which were both funded using BSIP. In these instances, the intentions were to enhance the reliability of local bus services and reduce passenger journey times.

## Funding

We frequently heard from stakeholders that funding, particularly Bus Grant funding (and previous BSIP funding), contributes to both the ambitions and success of an EP and can be the driving force in focusing priorities for EPs. Feedback stated that longer-term certainty of funding gives operators greater confidence to invest.

The Government is investing over £3 billion for the rest of the spending review period to support local leaders and bus operators across the country to improve bus services for millions of passengers. This includes multi-year allocations for local authorities under the Local Authority Bus Grant (LABG) totalling nearly £700 million per year, ending the short-term approach to bus funding and giving councils the certainty they need to plan ahead. Our aim is that this continued funding, coupled with more tailored support for EPs, will ensure EPs remain a viable and successful model for delivering bus service improvements.

## Phase 1: Legislation

Phase 1 of the EP Review was primarily carried out over Autumn 2024, with the purpose of identifying new legislative measures for EPs to be included in the for the Bus Services Act 2025 (the Act). The Act was introduced to the House of Lords on 17 December 2024 in its Bill form, and reached Royal Assent on 27 October 2025.

Specific measures were identified to be carried forward in the Act with an aim to strengthen and improve EPs. These are listed below and further detail can be found in the Explanatory Notes.

The measures relating to EPs will:

- better protect the availability and quality of socially necessary local bus services, by making an obligation for LTAs to identify such services and specify a process to consider alternative arrangements in the event of such services being cancelled or varied
- require LTAs to consult with organisations representing disabled people when making an EP or franchising scheme, and require LTAs to have regard to the need to enable disabled people to access local services when specifying requirements in an EP scheme
- give EPs the power to include measures relating to operator financial reinvestment, which will ensure greater return on public investment from measures like bus priority infrastructure, through reinvestment of operational savings back into the local bus market
- give EPs more flexibility by broadening the scope of measures that can be included to ensure they can cover the full EP area, rather than being limited by route
- speed up the process of making or varying an EP, by changing the operator objection mechanism so that rather than waiting up to 28 days for the objection period to lapse, LTAs will be able to move to the next stage in the EP process where all operators have indicated in writing that they have no objections
- enable the Secretary of State to direct the use of the statutory EP variation mechanism, rather than a bespoke mechanism, if the bespoke mechanism is resulting in irreconcilable negotiations between the LTA and operator(s)

- better facilitate information sharing by requiring LTAs to give advance notice to operators before issuing a request for information

LTAs will also be required to produce and keep under review a Bus Network Accessibility Plan, setting out provisions to assist passengers with disabilities to travel independently, safely and comfortably on local services and describing the actions the authority intends to take to further enable this.

In the process of identifying relevant measures for the Act, areas of importance that could be better resolved through updated EP guidance, closer support and upskilling, training or mentoring, have been taken forward as part of Phase 2 of the review, contributing to updates to EP guidance and the implementation of minimum standards.

## Phase 2: Wider policy and guidance

## Minimum standards

We found that there are opportunities for EPs to deliver low- and no-cost improvements which can make a real difference for passengers. However, not every EP is currently delivering these measures consistently.

The Government is providing over £3 billion of funding to deliver better bus services over the rest of the Spending Review period. The majority of this funding will be delivered through LTAs and operators in EPs through grant funding. In exchange for this investment and to ensure that value for taxpayer money is maximised, we will set minimum standards for EPs as a condition of future bus grant funding.

These standards will focus on measures that help make a good EP – one that is passenger-focused, collaborative, accountable and ambitious. They will help ensure that no matter where they are, passengers can expect a certain baseline to be met.

The list of standards has been developed following extensive engagement with stakeholders, including LTAs and operators. This list includes low-cost measures that have already proven to be successful in the EPs where they have been implemented.

These standards are a floor, not a ceiling. We expect many EPs will want to go beyond them to deliver an exemplary standard. They are additional to the legislative requirements set out in the 2017 Bus Services Act (as amended) and other relevant legislation.

Currently, there are standards for EPs set out in various places, as part of BSIP guidance, EP guidance and conditions of previous BSIP and Bus Grant funding. Some requirements were only applicable to EPs with Phase 1 BSIP funding awarded in 2022. We intend to standardise this in future so the same standards apply everywhere, as bus funding is now awarded via formula to all LTAs in England outside London.

### List of minimum standards:

We expect all EPs to continue to include the following commitments as conditions of future bus funding:

- maintain overall levels of baseline LTA bus spending from non-DfT sources

- LTA and operators to work together to promote concessionary bus travel and to proactively inform local residents when the authority becomes aware that they are eligible for such a concession
- where DfT is funding bus priority measures, any operating expenditure savings resulting from that new bus priority shall be reinvested by the bus operators that benefit from them into other BSIP commitments
- multi-operator information provision – either bus operators will include all services within their operating area (regardless of who provides them) on their timetables and websites, or there will be a single set of multi-operator information available across all operators
- have and promote a Bus Passenger Charter, which clearly sets out the standards passengers can expect, and signpost routes for redress and providing feedback to EPs. This must include consideration of the needs of all passengers, including people with disabilities, having taken into account the Public Sector Equality Duty under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010

New minimum requirements for EPs will include:

- offering and promoting a full range of multi-operator ticketing products, at little or no extra cost, compared to single-operator fares, and making this the default choice for passengers. We expect these schemes to incorporate fare capping over time, using the national contactless ticketing solution that is currently being developed known as 'Project Coral'. Local authorities and operators must ensure they have the right technology in place to meet these requirements
- publication of performance outcomes data to drive transparency and accountability. At a minimum, this should include data on patronage, customer satisfaction (through participation in the Transport Focus 'Your Bus Journey' survey), and punctuality, but we also encourage the use of localised Key Performance Indicators
- setting common timetable change dates. These will be determined by individual EPs, but we expect them to be set at twice-annual intervals. EPs may agree certain circumstances where timetables may be changed outside of these dates, for example to respond to seasonal changes in demand, or to introduce a service uplift that would have immediate benefits for passengers if started before the set date – any such exception must be agreed by the LTA
- setting out how they have met the new legislative requirement (being introduced in the Bus Services Act 2025) to have regard to the need to enable disabled people to access local services when specifying requirements in an EP scheme
- commitment to appropriately enforce new and existing bus lanes and bus gates
- commitment to continue maintenance of LTA bus infrastructure, including stops, stations and bus priority infrastructure (at least in line with existing LTA spending levels)

These minimum standards will support the delivery of improved outcomes in places which are not already meeting them, including improving passenger satisfaction and in turn improving patronage by making buses easier and more attractive to use. They are also expected to improve punctuality and journey time through maintenance and enforcement of bus lanes and bus gates, although this is expected to be a more modest impact.

## Implementation

We expect all EPs to meet these standards by March 2027 to receive 2027/28 bus grant funding.

We understand different EPs will have different starting points and it will take time for all EPs to reach the same standard throughout 2026/27, we will work with EPs to support them in meeting these standards.

## LTAs transitioning to franchising

Many LTAs may be considering whether franchising is the right option for their area. We consider meeting these minimum standards for EPs will be helpful, whether or not an area chooses to proceed with franchising, as they set the basis for a strong and integrated network to franchise. As EPs will vary in terms of progress towards the transition towards franchising, we may discuss exemptions with individual LTAs where there is concern that meeting these standards will detract or conflict with the franchising process.

## Further Considerations

Other minimum standards were considered or suggested by stakeholders through the course of the review. Not every requirement was taken forward, primarily because:

- some would require significant additional funding, and we want to empower local leaders to take their own decisions on funding priorities
- all measures will take LTA and operator resources to deliver, and there is a limit to how much can be delivered in a limited timeframe

The standards listed above have been chosen as they are considered to be the most impactful for passengers, affordable within existing budgets and deliverable within a one-year timeframe. We may consider extending the minimum standards in future to cover additional measures.

Other measures that were considered, but not required at this time for the reasons specified, include:

- setting standardised local definitions for ticketing products, including times of eligibility (for example, what time a day ticket ends); age of eligibility for discounted tickets
- tickets (for example, what age can be considered a child ticket) and the forms of evidence accepted for discounted tickets

- requirement for single network branding
- minimum standards for information at bus stops, suitable for the type and patronage of stops, for example all stops to include paper timetables
- single website pulling together information for the passenger

The above measures are strongly encouraged as examples of best practice within EPs.

## Information and data sharing

We heard from both LTAs and operators that they faced challenges around data sharing. Some LTAs reported reluctance from operators to provide data, and struggled to get access to the data they needed in a timely manner. Some bus operators reported challenges in sharing commercially sensitive data and felt that LTAs didn't always explain what the data would be used for. They reported many have small administrative teams who may not have capacity to respond to many data requests from different LTAs in different formats.

LTAs have rights set out in legislation and accompanying statutory guidance to obtain certain specified information about local bus services that operate either within or into the area in connection with preparing, or carrying out various functions as part of an EP plan or scheme.

EP Guidance currently sets out the types of information that may be requested. Information may be requested in any reasonable form, taking into account the manner in which it is kept. The LTA may also specify when the information should be provided, but this must be within a reasonable time period (e.g. 2-4 weeks). Guidance also specifies how and with whom the LTA may share obtained information and how commercially sensitive information should be handled.

As set out above, the Bus Services Act 2025 introduces a new requirement for LTAs to give advance notice to operators before issuing a request for information. During the review, we received further suggestions on ways that data sharing could be improved.

First, some stakeholders suggested setting templates that all LTAs and operators must use for the provision of data. This would drive consistency of expectations across the sector and ensure that operators are not having to provide the same information in different formats to different LTAs. However, with data currently held in different formats by operators and the large breadth of information which can be requested, it would be challenging to develop a template that worked for all needs and would require a large amount of operator resource to change data into the required format. We will not therefore be pursuing this at this time, but will keep it under review.

Second, some stakeholders suggested data sharing agreements should be put in place so operators can have confidence in how commercially sensitive information will be handled. We will seek to identify best practice in this area and promote the use of a model data sharing agreement in future.

## Accountability and enforcement

For an EP to be successful, it requires clear accountability. Operators and LTA must be able to hold each other to account. LTAs are also directly accountable to their electorate. As such, EPs will be required to publish performance data (see section on minimum standards above), so the public has access to the information they need to hold their elected members to account.

As part of this, all EPs will be required to participate in Transport Focus's bus passenger satisfaction surveys ('Your Bus Journey'), the results of which will be published.

### Enforcement

EP Schemes, once made, are legally binding documents. While the strength of relationships in an EP is the most important measure for success, and enforcement should only be a last resort, it is vital that these relationships are underpinned by a legal agreement with sufficient enforcement powers to protect all parties.

Both LTAs and operators expressed concern around enforcement, and some lacked an understanding of the enforcement options available to them.

Once an EP is made, the standards of service that operators must comply with become requirements of local bus service registration. The traffic commissioner may take regulatory action if the operator does not comply with EP requirements, which can include issuing a financial penalty or cancelling the registration if appropriate. However, it is usually not in the interests of passengers to cancel a registration, and this would be taken into account by a traffic commissioner when making a decision.

The Bus Services Act 2017 Section 9 also places a legal obligation on LTAs to provide facilities and measures as specified in the scheme, unless there are circumstances beyond their control that temporarily prevents them from doing so.

During the course of the review, we have not identified any cases where LTAs or operators have taken enforcement action against a party to the EP for not meeting commitments in the EP. EPs are still relatively new, and they have not yet been tested legally.

We will work with the traffic commissioners to ensure that there is understanding and effective implementation of the framework in relation to sanctions for EPs and provide the

necessary clarity and accountability to all parties. This will be set out in the updated EP guidance.

## EP Guidance

We will update and publish new EP Guidance in 2026. The current guidance was published in 2021 following the National Bus Strategy, with a clear aim to help Local Transport Authorities and bus operators to work collaboratively and at pace to deliver Bus Service Improvement Plans.

From our engagement with EPs, it has been clear that whilst the Guidance is relevant and helpful, it is not a user-friendly document, which has caused a lack of engagement with it amongst some stakeholders. A key part of the update to EP Guidance will involve simplification in the wording and layout to ensure operators and Local Transport Authorities are able to refer to it at ease. The Guidance will also be complemented by a new EP Manual to give more practical advice and best practice examples.

The update to guidance is also intended to include:

- a general update to reflect current Government policies and remove outdated references
- a substantial update to sections impacted to changes in legislation as part of the Bus Services Act 2025, including operator objections, provision of information, the bespoke variation mechanism and the addition of a new advice in guidance around accessibility
- a new chapter providing guidance relating to Socially Necessary Local Services
- a comprehensive update to the existing section on Ticketing to incorporate updates on Project Coral
- a new chapter in the guidance on minimum standards
- new sections reflecting Government priorities around safety
- cross-references to other updated guidance documents around Franchising, BSIPs and Demand Responsive Transport
- cross-references to a new EP Manual

- clarifications around how EP commitments can be enforced through the traffic commissioners
- clarification that LTAs may choose to fulfil the requirement to have a Bus Service Improvement Plan through the EP Plan

## Support for EPs

For EPs to be successful, the people working on them need the skills and capability to build accountable, ambitious, collaborative and passenger-focused partnerships.

We have listened to what support stakeholders have asked for. We will provide a new EP Manual, including template resources and examples of good practice, and better opportunities for learning from other EPs, and for the places that need it most, direct support from dedicated working groups delivered by BCoE.

### EP Manual

A toolkit for EP officers was published in 2023 which provided advice to EP officers and outlined their responsibilities. We will provide a new manual to include examples of good practice and provide practical tips, building on the new EP Guidance. Stakeholders asked for further advice on areas like increasing the participation of operators in Board meetings and how to engage with Community Transport providers. We will look to identify and include examples of best practice in these areas in the EP Manual.

### Building capability through peer support with BCoE

Funded by the DfT and run by the Chartered Institution of Highways and Transportation, the Bus Centre of Excellence (BCoE) launched in 2023. Its purpose is to bring together LTAs, operators and suppliers to develop examples of best practice and to build skills in order to deliver better bus services. We have considered where BCoE can be better utilised to support the delivery of EPs.

Some EPs have already taken steps to collaborate with other EPs in neighbouring authorities, such as West Northamptonshire, who invite North Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire and Milton Keynes to their Bus Stakeholder Forums. However, other EPs commented they do not feel there are enough opportunities to engage with other EPs, so we suggest a networking group could be set up through BCoE, similar to their network for franchising LTAs.

Stakeholders discussed the difficulties that arise when experienced staff leave or retire. We suggest a 'buddy' system could be implemented by BCoE, buddying less experienced EP officers with more experienced officers.

DfT currently hosts a monthly Bus Strategy Forum, which was received positively by many stakeholders. We will work with BCoE to continue these sessions and use them to showcase best practice, alongside utilising BCoE to deliver more interactive webinars and workshops.