

A quick guide: The Buses Bill 2017

The stated aims of the Bus Services Bill are to unlock the potential of bus travel, increase the provision of bus services and replicate some of the more attractive elements of bus services in London. It was referred to as an 'enabling Bill', giving local authorities control and responsibility for buses in their area and the freedom of choice to design bus services according to local need.

Passenger consultation

The statutory guidance issued by the Department for Transport requires passenger input to be sought but does not state how or at what stage this should be done.

Franchising

The Bill contains an option to introduce a franchising scheme (similar to the London system) which would allow local authorities to design the bus services they want and ask operators to compete for a contract, but this will only be possible in areas where they accept the requirement to have an elected mayor. According to the DfT, having an elected mayor specifically for the purposes of franchising will ensure they are judged on their ability to run bus services and are personally held to account. This requirement was removed by the House of Lords and reinstated by the House of Commons.

Rural bus services

The Bill does not exclude predominantly rural areas from applying to have a franchised system approved although this would possibly be more complex, but it does require urban schemes to take account of the services to outlying or cross-boundary areas to ensure passengers are not unduly inconvenienced by any changes.

Multi-operator ticketing and open data

There is a requirement for the provision of multi-operator smartcard type schemes similar to London's Oyster card in the schemes covered by the Bill. There is also a requirement for data such as timetable information to be available free of charge so this would help the development of information sources and mobile apps to be improved.

Municipal bus operators

While existing municipal services can continue, there is a clause preventing any new municipal bus services being established by a local authority. This requirement was removed by the House of Lords and reinstated by the House of Commons.

Local Transport Teams

A condition of franchising is that the expertise lost to local transport teams following years of successive central government funding cuts, will have to be reinstated.

Funding

The Buses Bill offers no new funding for any of the requirements associated with the opportunities made available in the Bill.

So what does it mean for passengers?

Essentially, from a passenger perspective, a well-designed scheme brought forward under the new legislation could ensure that passengers are both consulted and better-served in some areas as a result of powers being devolved to a local authority. However, it is not clear how the cost of the requirements involved will be found as “spare” cash for bus service provision is just not available in most local authorities. It seems that, in most parts of the country, the existing quality partnerships with commercial operators are more likely to provide the kind of improvements needed as they have resources and are prepared to invest in service development.

Bus Users UK has worked long and hard to improve this legislation, arguing against the requirement for a mayor and the bar on new municipal authorities in particular, with success in the Lords but these changes were overturned in the House of Commons before the Bill was finally passed. It did mean that far more decision-makers became more educated about the key role that buses play in the country’s economy, health and social fabric, which is something to build upon. We now have to look forward to seeing how creative local authorities can be in making this legislation work for the people they serve.

About Bus Users

Bus Users is a charity that campaigns for inclusive, accessible transport. We are the only approved Alternative Dispute Resolution Body for the bus and coach industry and the designated body for handling complaints under the Passenger Rights in Bus and Coach Legislation. We are also part of a Sustainable Transport Alliance, a group working to promote the benefits of public, shared and active travel.

Alongside our complaints work we investigate and monitor services and work with operators and transport providers to improve services for everyone. We run events, carry out research, respond to consultations, speak at government select committees and take part in industry events to make sure the voice of the passenger is heard.

Bus Users UK Charitable Trust Ltd is a registered charity (1178677 and SC049144) and a Company Limited by Guarantee (04635458).

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