

Speech

The case for the Buses Bill

From: Department for Transport (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-transport>) and **Andrew Jones MP** (<https://www.gov.uk/government/people/andrew-jones>)

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Bus Minister Andrew Jones lays out the case for the government's Buses Bill.



Introduction

Thank you for the chance to speak this evening (23 February 2016).

It's a really opportune time to be speaking in Parliament about road passenger transport, and in particular, about buses. Because we will shortly introduce the government's Buses Bill: the first bus-specific legislation in living memory. So tonight is a good opportunity to say the latest on what the bill will contain.

Background to the bill – 3 principles

But first, I would like to set out some of the thinking behind the bill. It's a bill that has been informed by three principles.

Our first principle is simply this: that people using buses is a good thing. Bus services offer huge public benefits. They help people get to the shops and to work, boosting our economy. They enable people to visit friends and family, building social links. And buses can reduce air pollution, helping our environment.

So our second principle is that, given we want to see people using buses, local areas should have the best possible tools for supporting and increasing that bus usage. Over recent decades, the trend in numbers of people taking the bus is patchy. There's regional variation. Some places have seen declines. In others there's been a rise. Either way, it's clear that the tools local areas have at their disposal to increase bus usage, such as the quality contracts — introduced in 2001 but still never successfully used — are insufficiently effective. So we believe there's a case for local areas to have some new options, even if those options won't be taken up in every area.

And that leads to the third principle informing the bill: the principle of devolution. Devolution is an underlying theme of this government. And not just in transport. You can see it in free schools, academies, the scrapping of centrally-set targets for local authorities, and directly elected mayors. It's because people want more of a say in the decisions that affect them. And there's an appetite for political power to become more local. So we've agreed devolution deals with Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield, and several other areas. And these places have told us that, for devolution to reach its full potential, they need greater choice over how local transport works. To have the choice, for example, to link bus routes to local economic development, such as new housing, and new business parks.

Open data

So those are the principles that inform the content of the Buses Bill. And those principles are why the bill will include a requirement that operators make data about routes, fares and times open and accessible.

It is in everyone's interests for people to know as much as possible about the bus services in their area. So through open data, app makers will be able to develop products that passengers can use to plan their journeys and give people the confidence to leave the car at home and take the bus instead.

New partnerships

The bill will also introduce new arrangements for local authorities and bus operators to enter into partnership with one another; to agree their own standards for all services in their area; perhaps focusing on frequency and reliability along a particular route or transport corridor; or setting emissions standards to improve local air quality; or introducing common branding, marketing and ticketing rules over a wider geographical area.

This new partnership approach won't be right for every area. And sometimes, there will be a case for more radical change. For example, some of the things that some local areas want can be difficult to deliver in a fully de-regulated bus market — such as a single fare structure across different operators and transport modes.

Franchising

So the bill will honour our devolution deal commitments to give local authorities the choice to use new powers to franchise bus services in their areas. I want to keep the good parts of the quality contract scheme process, which at least forces people to think things through properly. But I want to lose the parts which don't work, such as the excessive cost and the bureaucracy. The decision to take up these new powers will be for local areas to take. Ministers might have a role in granting the powers in the first place — as they presently do through the devolution deal process. But once a local area has these powers, the decision to use them will be theirs and theirs alone.

As you would expect, local areas will need clear arrangements for ensuring the powers are used accountably, the capability to meet their promises to passengers, and a system that does not disadvantage bus services that cross local or national boundaries. Yet we certainly do not foresee a one-size-fits-all approach in every area. Some local authorities may want to introduce newly-integrated, uniformly branded networks of services, much like you see in London. Others will just want to build and improve on what's already there. Whatever approach is chosen — and that will be a local decision — we want to ensure that bus operators and the wider supply chain have as much notice of change as possible, and that the effects on small operators are considered properly.

What the bill will not do

So that is what the bill will do. Yet before concluding, I would also like to set out what the bill will not do.

First, and for the benefit of the coach operators in the room, it will not affect long-distance coach services. Nor will it affect coach hire services. It will only apply to local bus services. And even then, its effect will differ from area to area. Because the bill will be an enabling bill. It gives local authorities new choices about how they can improve bus services. But it does not impose those choices. In many cases it may be better to leave things just as they are. For those cases, our message will be – if it isn't broken, don't fix it. The status quo is acceptable too.

And finally, neither will the bill give local authorities new powers to take bus operators' assets, such as vehicles or land. Oversight of anti-competitive behaviour will be left to the Competition and Markets Authority – exactly where oversight lies at the moment.

Conclusion

So I hope that summary of the bill, of the thinking behind it and its contents, has been helpful.

We will introduce the bill soon – as soon as we've finished the legal drafting and we have been allocated Parliamentary time. But one thing's certain. Every member of this House knows how important bus services are to their constituents. So we can expect some really thorough debate on the bill before it obtains Royal Assent. If we get it right, passengers will benefit. And so, I believe, will the bus industry.

Thank you.

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