



Unite response to the Transport Select committee consultation: National bus strategy: One year on

This response is submitted by Unite the Union, the UK's largest trade union with 1.2 million members across the private and public sectors. The union's members work in a range of industries including manufacturing, financial services, print, media, construction, energy generation, chemicals, **transport**, local government, education, health and not for profit sectors.

In the arena of transport Unite represents **a quarter of a million members in all transport modes**, making it the largest transport union in the UK.

Unite has obtained the views of passenger transport members through our lay member committees at national and regional level. Therefore Unite is in a unique position to submit a response to this consultation.

A) Challenges facing the sector as it recovers from the pandemic and the effectiveness of steps taken by both Government and stakeholders in response;

Levelling up?

Despite the National Bus Strategy (the Strategy) pledging £3bn towards bus transformation to assist with levelling up public transport, this was reduced to £1.2bn following the Spending Review. Such a reduction will disproportionately affect already disadvantaged 'red wall' and rural areas. Resultantly we are now seeing a managed decline in the bus sector with more bus routes being cut, as opposed to the transformational investment the Strategy promised.

Confederation of Passenger Transport's (CPT) analysis of the Strategy found the £3bn funding fell far below what the sector needs to allow *"for local authorities and bus*

*operators to improve bus services*¹ as bids put forward by local authorities and bus operators for Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIPs) totalled over £7bn², This huge reduction in funding not only contradicts the Government's 'green agenda', but it will also isolate communities and put women who are more likely to rely on buses at risk.

The pandemic had a huge impact on passenger numbers which ultimately affected bus revenue, and despite the lifting of restrictions and return to the office, passenger numbers have not yet recovered to pre-pandemic levels³. Yet the Strategy missed an opportunity to mount a national campaign to encourage people to use more buses in order to counter the declining ridership.

The [Bus Recovery Grant](#) (BRG) to support the industry during the pandemic which was due to end on the 31st March 2022, was extended by £150m. Though welcome, this will only put a pause on planned route cuts, which before this extension was announced stood at a staggering 17% reduction of bus routes across the country. Indeed many areas like the North East of England were hit with a series of bus service reductions at the end of March, where in areas of Newcastle 30 routes were axed⁴

A rail example

Government funding of the operational railway increased in 2020-21 by £10.4 billion to £16.9 billion largely **due to the use of emergency measures to support passenger train operators**.⁵ And during the pandemic the rail industry totally reformed the way contracts were operated. Instead of franchises, where the cost for running the line to the train company increased year on year so that they paid two thirds of the cost in their final third of the agreement, the charge was suspended and instead train lines were renationalised, with contracts for services given to the existing operators where in effect they charged the government a set fee, and all profits (if any) are meant to go back to the government. This would have cost the tax payers millions in lost franchise payments, however, now the train companies have to provide a minimum level of service to receive the payment from the Government.

This should be replicated in the bus sector. We need the same level of support received by the rail industry and ultimately we need a sustainable model of bus funding that can only be achieved through municipal ownership bus services.

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²<https://www.cpt-uk.org/news/analysis-reveals-billions-of-pounds-shortfall-in-national-bus-strategy-plans/>

³https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1030718/annual-bus-statistics-year-ending-march-2021.pdf

⁴ <https://www.chroniclive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/north-east-bus-cuts-tsunami-23411231>

⁵ <https://www.orr.gov.uk/search-news/regulators-rail-industry-finance-report-shows-impact-pandemic>

Bus revolution?

The Strategy states the Government believes the ban on municipal ownership of buses is “ripe for review.” Yet a year on there has been no progress to action such a review. The admission that the 36 year old deregulation experiment, where the free market dictated bus routes, has been an unmitigated failure, is welcomed, however, the solutions proposed may not significantly improve services.

The transformation package proposed in the Strategy will not reverse decades of service cuts that have left communities isolated. Further, it could unleash more employment instability across the industry.

The proposals to allow councils to introduce franchising or enter into enhanced partnerships with operators, which will help to remove the cutthroat competition on profitable routes, are also welcome, however, such measures will neither be uniform nor compulsory. Moreover the Strategy relies on profit driven private bus operators to deliver solutions to level up areas which turned into transport deserts by these same bus operators who have routinely cut socially desirable but less profitable bus routes. The latest data from Traffic Commissioners shows that for **2020-21** there were **6,602** bus and coach operators with licenses in use in England, Scotland and Wales. For **2010-11**, the earliest year still available online, there were **9,503** bus and coach operators with licenses in use. There has been a net decrease (taking into account all new and cancelled registrations) of **2,901** bus and coach operators with licenses in use over ten years⁶. This is a decrease of **30.5% which translates into 3,000 bus cuts**.

The Strategy should have set out minimum standards for Local Transport Authorities would assess and deliver on local transport needs.

B) Progress against the ambitions and targets set out in national bus strategy including the effectiveness, pace and priority of the strategy’s implementation;

Better to ride in?

While the Strategy sets out a host of changes to make buses ‘*better to ride in*’ with modifications to make buses more accessible for people with disabilities, it fails to consider and set out solutions to improve safety for women who are vulnerable to sexual harassment on buses.

A 2020 YouGov report found over a third (38%) of women have been abused on London buses⁷. More broadly a 2020 report by the Government Equality Office which surveyed individuals to capture the prevalence of sexual harassment, found over a

⁶ [Traffic Commissioners for Great Britain, Traffic Commissioners Annual Reports, Table 8, last updated 20 August 2021](#)

⁷ <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2020/01/22/most-women-have-been-sexually-harassed-london-publ>

quarter of people in the UK who had experienced sexual harassment in the last 12 months, of the 28% who had experiences sexual harassment on public transport, 62% said this had occurred on a bus⁸.

The image below taken from the Government Equality office report list the scale of sexual harassment on public transport by transport mode, with the prevalence for this to occur on buses clearly highlighted.

Sexual harassment behaviour experienced on public transport	% experienced on public transport	Most commonly reported transport	%	2 nd most commonly reported transport	%	3 rd most commonly reported transport	%
Unwanted staring or looks	45%	Bus	63%	Train or tram	52%	Underground	38%
Personal invasion of space	39%	Bus	52%	Underground	45%	Train or tram	44%
Offensive materials	33%	Bus	60%	Train or tram	45%	Underground	21%
Sexual comments	23%	Bus	67%	Train or tram	47%	Underground	33%
Provocative sounds	23%	Bus	63%	Train or tram	51%	Underground	34%
Being followed or threatened	21%	Bus	42%	Underground	39%	Train or tram	35%
Sexual jokes	22%	Bus	66%	Train or tram	53%	Underground	35%
Unwanted non-sexual touching	21%	Bus	56%	Train or tram	45%	Underground	36%

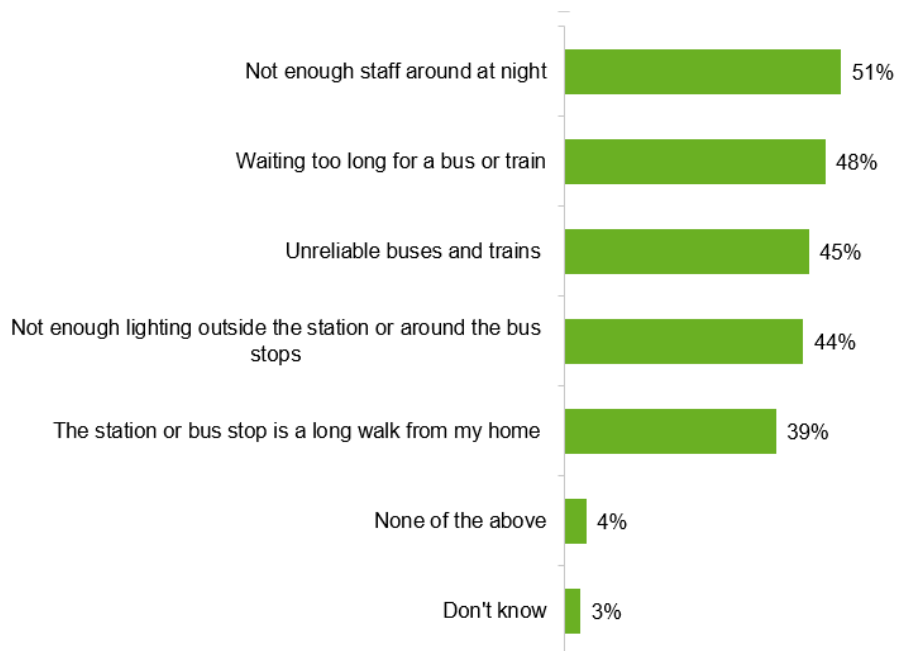
B12D: On which type(s) of public transportation have you experienced each? All who experienced sexual harassment on transport (excluding high degree victims) (1505). Behaviours with base sizes below n=50 have been excluded from analysis.

In February 2022 Unite commissioned a Survation poll to look at issues impact safe travel. The poll revealed heightened public concern over transport safety where;

- 55% said reduced bus services affected how safe they felt when travelling in their local area at night;
- 40% identified that there had been cuts to local bus services; (see table below);
- 49% confirmed there were no adequate local bus services which were safe, affordable and well lit;

⁸https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/100287/3/2021-07-12_Sexual_Harassment_Report_FINAL.pdf

The graph below taken from the Survation poll reveals reasons why people felt unsafe when travelling on public transport at night⁹;



While the DfT claim to be doing much on the transport network to improve safety, particularly for women and girls, the only scheme of this nature is in the rail sector where a rail to refuge scheme has been established, and while this is a necessary and ground-breaking initiative, the purpose of the scheme is to support women fleeing domestic violence, it does not deal with transport safety issues or address concerns about sexual harassment on public transport.

Additionally Transport Champions set up to tackle violence against women and girls on transport networks, failed to engage with a core group of stakeholders – Trade Unions representing transport workers who are key to delivering transport safety solutions.

Unite has launched a cross sector campaign developed between the Passenger and Hospitality sectors of our unions. Our Get Me Home Safely campaign ([link here: https://www.unitetheunion.org/campaigns/get-me-home-safely-campaign/](https://www.unitetheunion.org/campaigns/get-me-home-safely-campaign/)) sets out a host of key solutions to tackle women’s experiences of sexual abuse in and out of the workplace, help women and all night time economy workers to access safe transport home and addresses sexual harassment on public transport and the wider community, from a bus perspective the campaign calls for;

(i) Legislative change to address the weakness in enforcement of the law against sexual assault and harassment on public transport;

⁹ Unite Late Night Travel Poll February 2022 (for a copy of this report please contact Irina.docarmo@unitetheunion.org)

- (ii) **Municipal ownership of buses as a way to tackle the chronic shortage of night services;**
- (iii) **Mandatory training for transport workers on gender based violence to include practical guidance on reporting sexual harassment and assault on public transport.**

While the Strategy states that the bus sector should strive for the highest safety standards, and Bus Service Improvement Plans should also demonstrate how Local Transport Authorities and bus operators will work together to ensure that bus services are safe and perceived to be safe by all, it falls short on description and prescription for minimum standards of safety. In all the Strategy is to *laissez faire* where the Government should be setting standards to improve passenger safety.

C) Innovation in the sector, including examples of new methods that have been trialled successfully;

Municipally owned Reading buses are a success story and a leading example of how bus services should be run. As stated in the strategy Reading buses has “*one of the youngest and most environmentally friendly fleets in the UK, and in the autumn 2019 Transport Focus Bus Passenger Survey, Reading Buses’ passenger satisfaction score was 92%*”. This is because the municipal ownership model has allowed Reading buses to reinvest £3 million a year (circa 12-15% of its annual turnover) in its bus network¹⁰. Because it doesn't pay out dividends to private shareholders it is able to invest better quality buses resulting in Reading having one of the greenest fleets in the UK, and better services contribute its increased ridership (thus reducing private car use).

Rural mobility?

As previously mentioned in the sections above, profit driven bus operators have caused many rural areas to become ‘*transport deserts*’ with little to no transport connectivity and off peak bus services.

Unite spoke to its equality committee activists, which included representatives from women’s, retired members and BAEM committees, they shared their concerns about access bus services in rural areas, one woman from the retired members committee told us that where she lives (a rural town) the last bus is at 6 pm, such examples were acknowledged in the Strategy.

¹⁰ http://www.transportforqualityoflife.com/u/files/160314_Building_a_World-class_Bus_System_extended%20summary%20report_FINAL4_for_web.pdf

Examples like this highlight the significant disadvantages faced by people who live in rural areas with lack of bus services impacting on their employment and educational prospects as well as difficulties accessing health services and amenities.

Older people are particularly impacted by this and live in social isolation. Though the Strategy considers this, it fails to set out long-term lack strategic policy and a sustainable means to counter these disadvantages.

While the Strategy promises large amounts of funding, actual new funding that is immediately available appears to be limited. Furthermore Unite believes the new investment will not reverse cuts by cash-starved local authorities, particularly in rural areas.

The current Rural Mobility Fund must be increased and extended to properly fund community transport schemes.

Apps

The Strategy makes reference to the use of app based journey planners and transport booking technologies assist passengers, however it fails to consider infrastructure issues across many rural areas where broadband and mobile connectivity issues prevent passengers in these areas from making use of such innovations.

Additionally Unite is concerned on-demand app based services will lead to the “uberisation” of bus operations creating a two-tier bus service which will exclude vulnerable groups, damage timetabled services, result in unhealthy competition between competing bus operators and lead to a casualisation of drivers’ employment.

Unite also understands that trials of app-based services have been a failure, as passengers frequently experienced long delays before reaching their destination as other passengers were dropped off first. We received examples of 20 minute journeys taking over two hours on a non-timetabled service.

D) Bus funding over the short and long term;

Crucially we need sustainable funding for the bus sector. According to a Unite commissioned report from Transport for Quality of Life (TfQL), the London funding model if applied nationally would bring annual financial gains of £340m and municipal ownership would bring in £506m in financial gains. The report also states if London came under full municipalisation, it would immediately save £60m in retained dividends¹¹.

¹¹ https://www.transportforqualityoflife.com/u/files/160120_Building_a_world-class_bus_system_for_Britain_FINAL1.pdf

There are also serious questions about the funding behind the bus strategy. While large amounts are promised in the Strategy, actual new funding that is immediately available appears to be limited.

Furthermore new investment will not reverse cuts by cash-starved local authorities, which have resulted in the withdrawal or reduction in service of over 3,000 bus services since 2010, with a large percentage of local authorities no longer spending anything on supporting bus services, leading to social exclusion and reduced connectivity.

Bus improvement funding, as discussed in the Strategy, should also be utilised to improve pay, terms and conditions for bus workers, without whom buses cannot run. The Strategy missed a great opportunity to introduce minimum standards for bus drivers' pay and conditions and ignores the growing crisis of fatigue which results in accidents and leads to long-term health problems for drivers and puts passengers and other road users at risk.

The latest figure on bus driver shortage stands at **4,000 drivers**¹². The latest data from the Department of Transport demonstrates that over the past decade (in England outside London) **16,000 bus driver jobs have been lost** and in 2020 (the first year of the pandemic) we lost **2000 bus worker jobs** (in England outside London)¹³. Another dataset from the DfT found bus **driver earnings have dropped by 10% in 2020** and are lower than 10 years ago¹⁴.

In November 2021 Unite surveyed all lay members in the bus sector on the scale of bus driver shortages at their bus garages; their responses highlighted a sector with an imminent labour shortage crisis. The results revealed;

- **99% stated there were significant bus driver shortages at their bus garages;**
- **46% stated their garage had lost between 20 to 40 drivers;**
- **91% said the shortages were a result of low pay;**
- **89% said this is down to working conditions and 68% said it was due to working long hours;**

¹² <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/hgv-jobs-bus-driver-shortages-b1944363.html>

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/bus-statistics>

¹⁴ Ibid

- **Resultantly 43% of respondents said bus driver shortages were to blame for services being cancelled, particularly affecting the safety and financial wellbeing of women who are more reliant on buses to travel to and from work.**

Unite is concerned about the impact of service cancellations on the safety of those finishing work late at night. The issue is particularly acute for women, who make up a significant proportion of the night time economy, working in hotels, bars, clubs, warehousing, food production and care and health services. These workers who are more likely to be on low pay and insecure work are disproportionately more likely to experience sexual harassment in a public space and are more reliant on buses^{15,16}.

E) Decarbonisation of the sector and modal shift from other forms of transport.

Road to zero

The Government has said that in the long term zero emission buses will deliver big savings on bus operating costs which can be reinvested to improve services and would ultimately lower fares and deliver a better service for customers, yet despite the Government investing £89m in funding from [low](#) and [ultra-low emission bus schemes](#) (in addition to £1.3 billion from bus operators towards greener buses – over the past 5 years). As of 2021 only 2% of England’s bus fleet is fully zero-emission¹⁷.

Beyond the physical decarbonising strategies, there must be better integration of buses with other modes of transport – with integrated electronic ticketing and more bus routes serving railway stations and improved integration with cycling and walking routes and networks to reduce the need for private car use and better connect community to services.

While the take up of zero emission buses is crucial to reducing the carbon footprint of the sector, there is an imbalance between the costs of bus fares in different regions, which the Strategy recognises, but fails to remedy. Making transport affordable and accessible to all is fundamentally important to increasing ridership and will reduce emissions from private car use. However without practical support for more public control of buses this cannot be achieved as private companies set fares.

Ultimately a holistic approach is needed for developing solutions to decarbonise buses and reach zero emissions within the target dates. Such solutions must consider

¹⁵ <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/uk-policy-briefings/2019-wbg-briefing-public-transport-and-gender/>

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/nts03-modal-comparisons#mode-by-age-and-gender>

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/ending-the-sale-of-new-diesel-buses/ending-of-the-sale-of-new-diesel-buses>

working conditions of bus workers. Unite believe the long term operating cost savings should also be put towards improving pay and conditions and upskilling bus workers.

As mentioned in the sections above, driver shortages are affecting service cancelations and will result in commuters opting to use private vehicles, many of which are polluting diesel vehicles. In addition bus driver shortage is adding to already high levels of overtime which have a circular effect of forcing bus drivers to leave the sector due to fatigue.
