

Buses

People made over 300 million journeys by local bus in Scotland in 2023. Around three quarters of public transport trips are by bus. But, with local authority funding to support unremunerative routes and services under pressure, more people must be attracted to use local public transport to avoid cutbacks and to meet the government social and environmental targets as follows:

- **Mobility:** Public transport gives many people without cars access to employment, education, health and entertainment facilities. Better public transport will also attract more car owners, helping to hit the Scottish government's target of a 20% cut in car kilometres by 2030.
- **Net Zero:** Transport produces 28% of CO₂ emissions, with cars and lorries accounting for three-quarters of this. EVs are rising in number but only slowly. Electric and hydrogen buses offer a green alternative to car travel.
- **Health:** Using the bus, cycling or walking is more active than car travel. The bus is often the only practical option for those who are unable to drive. Mental health and wellbeing is enhanced by the ability to get out and about and to meet people.
- **Social Equity:** The young, elderly, economically disadvantaged and disabled depend more on public transport. Half the population are eligible for free concessionary bus and coach travel. **But this is only useful where services are available.**

Bus Use: Overall local bus usage and services are declining in Scotland. Rural routes in many cases can only be served economically when linked to school contracts. For communities without a railway station, public transport is only available on profitable bus routes or where councils can afford a subsidy. **Local bus travel fell by 14% from 2013 to 2019¹ in Scotland.**

In some countries public transport is assured across all regions. For instance, in Switzerland (with a higher car ownership rate than Scotland), article 81A of the constitution ensures "an adequate range of public transport services is provided on rail, road, water .. in all regions of the country". This is overseen by cantons via bus franchising, municipal bus and tram services, and rail and postbus networks linking together to create a nationwide co-ordinated system. **Swiss bus travel rose by 14 % from 2013 to 2019¹.**

Bus Reform:

International comparisons show that in many European countries bus usage is increasing. In Scotland passenger numbers on local buses have been in decline for several decades. Change in the present bus regulatory framework is needed.

The Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 contains a range of options as part of a toolkit for bus service reform.

It allows local transport authorities to run their own bus services; franchise bus services in their areas; or enter into Bus Services Improvement Partnerships (BSIPs) with bus operators within their areas.

Bus Franchising

Bus franchising is not favoured by some bus operators in Scotland as profit margins are likely to be lower. However, passenger growth in continental countries where bus franchising is common (like Austria and Switzerland) suggests that this approach can sustain an extensive network of rural and urban local buses into the future. In the UK, London buses are operated as a number of franchises let by Transport for London.

However, the procedure for setting up bus franchises in Scotland seems onerous and is likely to have to be amended to enable progress to be made.

Urban Transport

The Verkehrsverbund model of integrated public transport services, fares and ticketing has been very successful in boosting public transport use in some German, Austrian and Swiss cities. Public transport services are supplied by municipally owned bus companies, franchised bus operators, city metro and or tram systems, and the state rail system co-operating to provide citizens with a unified, seamless public transport network with interconnecting services covering the whole city.

The Glasgow Connectivity Commission identified the steep decline in bus speeds in the city caused by car congestion. The situation in Edinburgh and other Scottish cities is no better. Worthwhile improvements in bus journey times can be made by means of additional bus lanes, adaptive traffic signals, bus gates, etc. Government and local council investment priorities should be consistent with policies for modal shift to sustainable transport options, and with Net Zero commitments. Bus franchising or transport authority bus ownership would facilitate design of traffic-free zones in cities, with public transport co-ordinated to use strategic transport corridors

Rural Transport

Local bus services in rural areas have been in decline. Lack of public transport and reliance on car travel is a major factor in rural depopulation, particularly for young people. SAPT believes that transport integration, including co-ordination of local bus services with longer distance rural coach and rail timetables, could boost overall public transport usage: rural buses, as well as serving essential local needs, would give every community access to the national transport system. This would also make it easier for tourists to get around the countryside without needing a car, facilitating “green tourism” and alleviating car parking congestion at tourist hotspots.

To attract more people to use local buses franchises will need to specify good service levels. These would be unlikely to cover costs on many routes so franchises would require a greater share of the overall £1.7 billion of annual public transport financial support. A strategy to provide funding for local transport authorities to support local buses within the overall Scottish transport budget is needed. One possibility might be to scale back or withdraw public funding of free concessionary travel on profitable inter-city coach journeys, with government savings switched

to local transport authorities to support local buses. Resulting modal shift from privately owned inter-city coach to state owned Inter7City trains should reduce rail subsidy allowing these savings to be reallocated to supporting local bus services.

Note 1: Following the slump in travel during the pandemic, local bus passenger numbers in Scotland had recovered to **83%** of the 2019 level by 2022. Bus passenger numbers in Switzerland recovered to **96%** of the 2019 level by 2022.