

National Association of Local Councils: Submission to the Bus Services [No.2] [Commons] Bill  
Committee

About NALC:

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) represents 10,000 parish and town councils across England, working in collaboration with county associations to support, promote and improve communities. Parish and town councils in England represent 35 million people with 16 million electors, raising £800 million in precept and investing over £2 billion in communities.

Around 100,000 councillors spend over 14 million hours a year serving these councils to help drive positive change in their local area. These vibrant and dynamic councils are at the heart of their communities, helping to deliver vital public services and giving residents a truly democratic voice.

Context:

The National Association for Local Councils (NALC) would like the Bill to provide further clarity around which authorities are involved in protecting “socially necessary services” for communities across the country.

In its current form, the Bill states that Enhanced Partnerships (EPs) must define and safeguard any local bus services considered to be “socially necessary” – in other words, those which may not be commercially viable but are essential for local connectivity.

As stated in the Bill, any “socially necessary services” must be defined by the relevant “authority” or “authorities” (otherwise known as Local Transport Authorities, or LTAs). Local Transport Authorities typically consist of upper tier local authorities – usually combined authorities and county councils – but can also include unitary authorities.

However, given the Government’s broader ambition to create better and more locally-responsive services, NALC believes there is a valuable opportunity to formally recognise the contribution of parish and town councils in shaping these services. This is particularly relevant in rural and under-served areas, where parish and town councils can provide detailed input to EPs based on deeply localised knowledge of their respective areas.

Many of our councils already provide financial support or other forms of assistance to protect local routes. They also have detailed knowledge of residents’ transport needs and can help local transport authorities better identify priorities and service gaps.

We believe this approach aligns with the Bill’s objectives of improving the responsiveness and resilience of the bus network and ensuring that vital services are maintained in the communities that need them most.

## Scope for changing the Bill:

NALC is supportive of greater devolution of services to local communities and believes that its members can play an important role in ensuring residents have access to appropriate bus services. NALC also wants to ensure residents are not unduly impacted by the removal of services because of a lack of consultation from LTAs.

In certain circumstances, parish and town councils will be best placed to determine which bus services fulfil the requirements of a “socially necessary service” and thereby avoid the removal of a bus route that meets essential local demand.

However, we are not seeking a statutory duty – this would remain a matter for LTAs. While many of NALC’s councils already provide financial support or other forms of assistance to protect local routes, there are others who would lack the capacity to undertake greater financial or administrative responsibility.

Instead, we propose a consultative mechanism whereby parish and town councils can contribute if they wish to do so. This ensures local insight is captured without creating additional administrative burdens for councils that do not have capacity for or interest in engaging.

## Proposed amendment:

As such, NALC proposes the following amendment at Committee Stage:

- section 14(2)(a)(ab) places a duty on Enhanced Partnerships to list “which of those local services the authority or authorities consider are socially necessary local services”.

We propose amending this to expand on the definition of “authorities”, explicitly setting out which authorities should be considered, which would include parish and town councils and give them the opportunity to provide expertise should they wish to do so.

## Bus Services: Need for Change

Among the reasons outlined above, there is an urgent need to ensure better rural provision for bus services – and it is positive that the Bill is seeking to improve local routes. However, due in large part to budget cuts and an uneven distribution of resources, rural bus services have decreased by 18% since 2019. Exempting direct consultative input from parish and town councils would therefore be a missed opportunity to reverse this decline – particularly when, because of remoteness or geographical isolation, maintaining a local bus service is socially necessary for many of NALC’s members.

## Contact NALC

If you would like to discuss this further, please contact us at [nalc@connectpa.co.uk](mailto:nalc@connectpa.co.uk).