Written evidence submitted by the Chartered Institution of Highways and Transportation (CIHT) (BCC0024)

The Chartered Institution of Highways and Transportation (CIHT) is a membership organisation representing over 10,000 people who work in the highways and transportation sector. CIHT members plan, design, build, operate and maintain best-in-class transport systems and infrastructure. In addition, the CIHT manages the Bus Centre of Excellence (BCoE) which is funded by the Department of Transport (DfT).

BCoE is free to join for anyone working in the bus industry and has over 1,200 members who work in local authorities, transport consultancies and for bus operators. BCoE promotes best practice in the bus industry (for example through webinars and in-person events) and provides training opportunities for bus professionals. BCoE also runs three networks for its members (Public Sector Members Network, Bus Safety Network and Zero Emissions Buses Drop-in Sessions); a new fourth network around Bus Franchising will be launched soon. BCoE, in collaboration with the DfT, will be organising a conference on Rural Transport in July this year, as we appreciate the importance of this issue.

CIHT welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Transport Committee's inquiry into how buses connect communities as people need an effective transport network to support their economic activity and social wellbeing. Good transport links provide access to employment, goods, services and opportunities. How society invests in and uses the transport network also impacts climate change and public health.

In "A Transport Network fit for all our futures[1]" CIHT called for everyone to have the opportunity to travel sustainably, and recommended that our streets, towns, and neighbourhoods should be accessible to all by ensuring that transport solutions improve social inclusion by putting equity issues[2] at the centre of policy and infrastructure development.

In its call for evidence, the Transport Committee said it would particularly welcome views on the following:

a. How the Government's proposed reforms of powers over buses in England, and recently-announced funding, should take into account the particular

challenges of rural areas and local authorities outside major cities, and how authorities in these areas can make best use of those powers and funding.

The Government's proposed reforms must engage with the distinct demographic, economic, and infrastructural realities of rural areas and smaller urban centres. Unlike major metropolitan hubs, these areas face persistent challenges in providing sustainable and equitable bus services due to sparse populations, extensive travel distances, and limited economies of scale or cross subsidisation opportunities (e.g. between rural and urban bus routes).

Key considerations include:

- **Funding Models**: Financial allocations to Local Transport Authorities must be structured to reflect the social value of buses[3] and disproportionately high per-capita costs of rural transport provision. This includes recognising seasonal fluctuations in demand and ensuring resources/support for essential, yet commercially unviable, routes.

- **Strategic Capacity Building**: Local authorities often lack the technical expertise necessary to reform and improve local bus services. The Government should prioritise programs that offer technical assistance, knowledge sharing, and access to experts (e.g. academics, consultants) to enhance local capacity. CIHT and BCoE is working to increase this capacity, through events, training opportunities and bringing together experts in member networks. BCoE members can also access free or heavily discounted training courses.

- **Network Integration**: Rural services should not operate in isolation but as components of interconnected regional networks. Seamless multimodal integration, incorporating Demand Responsive Transport (DRT), rail, cycling, and walking, will ensure that rural and semi-rural areas remain accessible and economically active. In addition, a truly integrated public transport network needs to cater for not only for rural to urban journey patterns, but also rural to rural, ensuring that *all* communities are connected.

b. The effectiveness of recent Government policy in tackling declines in bus services.

Government interventions, including the National Bus Strategy and Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIPs), have aimed to address the persistent decline in bus service provision. However, their impact remains uneven and limited by systemic challenges:

- Enhanced Partnerships (EPs) have demonstrated they are a valid model for improving services, but the approach could be improved to make it easier for local authorities and bus operators to collaborate. Issues around EPs include the complexity of government guidance for setting up and managing EPs, the need for long-term funding, greater support for rural areas, alignment of wider policy (active travel, network integration, parking policy) and increased knowledge sharing.

- Funding Uncertainty: Short-term and piecemeal funding frameworks impede strategic, long-term planning. Disparities in resource allocation exacerbate existing inequalities, leaving many localities underserved or not served at all.

Recommendations:

- Specifically target regions with transport poverty[4] and directly provide support to these Local Transport Authorities (e.g. extra funding, capacity building within Local Transport Authority).

- Establish robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks to ensure that efforts deliver measurable outcomes and then share best practice, for example, which BSIP or EP initiatives work best. This best practice can be disseminated by the Bus Centre of Excellence.

- Help to avoid replication and minimisation of administrative tasks within EPs by providing standardised templates for Terms of Reference, Data Sharing Agreements, Non-Disclosure Agreements, etc.

- Transition to multi-year funding commitments that provide stability for operators and local authorities, facilitating longer term planning.

c. How effectively bus services function as part of integrated multi-modal networks that improve mobility for people who live in areas with declining services.

The effectiveness of buses as components of integrated transport networks is undermined by fragmentation and a lack of coordination. In areas with declining services, these deficiencies are particularly pronounced and are due to:

- **Operational fragmentation**: The absence of multi-operator ticketing systems and aligned scheduling among transport operators and between transport modes (bus and rail) reduces the efficiency and attractiveness of buses, especially when administrative boundaries are crossed.

- **Disparity in bus infrastructure provision**: there are notable disparities in the provision and design of bus infrastructure (e.g. bus shelters) which deters passenger use and detracts from building a coherent and consistent brand ("look and feel") of local public transport.

- **Disparity in economic development**: The decline in rural bus services disrupts connectivity to broader regional and national transport systems and exacerbates car dependency, further deepening social and economic marginalisation, which can result in uneven economic opportunities and development.

Proposed solutions are:

- **Cross-operator ticketing platforms**: Implement integrated ticketing systems that facilitate seamless transitions between buses (but also between trains in a franchised environment), and potentially other modes of transport such as e-scooters and rental bicycles.

- **Enhanced Coordination**: Establish governance structures to synchronise planning and operations across transport modes and administrative boundaries. For example, a rural bus network and timetable should align to rail services timetable to make the local public transport offering a more attractive and meaningful proposition to passengers.

- **Establish a statutory bus stop typology**: establish guidance on how to provide the right bus stop at the right place, with particular attention to the accessibility **of** the bus stop and **to** the bus stop. In addition, personal safety at and around bus stops must be considered when devising this typology, to enhance perceptions of personal safety. The

Campaign for Better Transport has released the report ''Better Bus Stops: creating a national bus stop standard[5]'' which includes the recommendation that a national standard for bus stops should be defined and implemented to give more people the confidence to take the bus. The CIHT recently published a report on ''Creating a Public Realm for All[6]'' which highlights the importance of universal accessibility in the public realm and how this can be achieved.

- **Improve the reliability of bus services**: make it easier to implement bus priority measures (e.g. bus lanes) to make bus services more reliable and resilient. In addition, roadworks greatly impact the reliability of bus services through delays and bus routes diversions. Local Transport Authorities need better support to manage roadworks in a consistent way to improve the resilience of local bus networks. Please see the CIHT's response to the call for evidence on to the Transport Committee's inquiry into managing the impacts of street works (January, 2025).

- **Promote active travel**: Promote investments in cycling, walking, and other active travel infrastructure to complement bus networks, widen public transport catchment and enhance accessibility.

d. The social and economic impacts of poor connectivity on access to education, healthcare, employment, and social inclusion in communities, as well as on the economy of towns and villages.

Poor transport connectivity imposes social and economic burdens on communities:

- **Educational Disadvantages**: Limited bus services hinder access to schools, colleges, and vocational training, particularly for students in rural areas, thereby perpetuating educational inequality.

- **Healthcare Barriers**: Inadequate transport restricts access to medical facilities, especially for older people and people with mobility impairments, leading to delays in care and exacerbation of health inequities.

- **Economic isolation**: Poor connectivity diminishes access to employment opportunities, disproportionately affecting low-income individuals and

shift workers. This exacerbates economic disparities and reduces social mobility.

- **Social isolation and community fragmentation**: Inaccessible transport fosters isolation, weakening community bonds and increasing mental health challenges.

- **Economic Decline**: Decreased connectivity undermines the viability of local businesses, reducing footfall in town centres and discouraging investment in rural economies.

e. The effectiveness of current funding models and governance structures in enabling local transport authorities and commercial operators to improve, sustain, and keep bus services outside major metropolitan areas affordable, and the potential effectiveness of alternatives.

Existing funding models and governance frameworks are broadly inadequate for addressing the unique challenges of non-metropolitan areas:

- **Profit-driven bus services**: The deregulated bus sector often encourages commercial operators to deprioritise socially necessary routes due to low profitability, leaving vulnerable communities underserved, further exacerbating rural-urban inequalities. This results in a rural bus network that does not reflect the needs of local communities, for example in terms of the routing of the bus, frequency and hours of operation.

- **Governance Gaps**: Fragmentation of responsibilities within and across local authorities impedes cohesive planning, reduces network efficiency and increases duplication of effort. In many towns and cities, facilitating car travel is prioritised above facilitating bus travel. For example, road space is allocated to on-street parking instead of to bus priority measures and car parking charges are usually cheaper than the fare for a single bus journey. However, the relationship between buses and car parking is rarely mentioned when discussing how to improve bus services. This is usually because bus services are controlled by bus operators and a Local Transport Authority (at County or District level), whilst car parking might be managed by a completely different team or even organisation.

- **Funding Inconsistencies**: Reliance on short-term funding cycles discourages long-term strategic planning and investment.

Proposed alternatives:

- **Franchising models to focus on urban areas**: Grant local authorities in urban areas greater control over route planning and fare structures in an effort to balance commercial/operational priorities with social objectives.

- **Expand and focus Enhanced Partnerships in rural areas**: EPs work relatively well in a rural context, where franchising is usually not the ideal policy solution to improve buses, primarily due to lower population densities. Strengthening EPs with enforceable service standards and incentives for addressing underserved rural areas can enhance outcomes.

- **Sustainable funding mechanisms**: Introduce multi-year funding agreements to promote stability and incentivise infrastructure development. This can lead to better long-term outcomes, as Local Authorities will have more time to build their capacity and deliver improvements.

- **Constraining car parking supply (especially in town centres) or increasing car parking charges** will have a positive impact on buses and contribute to making public transport a realistic and practical alternative to the private car, and at the same time helping with decarbonisation efforts. Future Government policies should highlight the link between buses (and public transport in general) with car parking charges, and equip local authorities with the necessary powers and governance structure to bring planning for buses and cars together.

f. Evaluating the potential of alternative service models, including Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) and community transport, and other innovations or technologies which could support or replace buses serving less populated communities, and what steps the Government should take to support them.

DRT services are usually deployed in rural or peri-urban areas where there is little or no provision of bus services. DRT can help to improve accessibility,

connectivity and reduce travel times (compared to conventional buses) and reduce social exclusion. DRT schemes typically utilise minibuses, which can be driven on narrow roads where buses cannot penetrate due to size, thus directly reaching more residents living in rural communities.

DRT services do not depend on physical infrastructure like bus stops (so passenger pick-ups or drop-offs often do not involve walking to a bus stop) and are therefore helpful for people with mobility impairments. In general DRT can help improve perceptions of personal safety, since in certain areas, the walk to, and the wait at, a bus stop might involve a degree of personal risk, especially during the hours of darkness.

Many local authorities have embraced DRT, often with minimal funding and limited expertise or capacity to ensure their long-term sustainability, both financially and operationally. Consequently, a significant number of these schemes fail to progress beyond the pilot stage. Established transport planning principles emphasise that DRT is a strategic tool that should be used as a mechanism to build ridership, gather valuable data on travel patterns and demand, and address previously suppressed travel needs due to insufficient transport options. By stimulating and shaping demand for public transport, DRT can play a pivotal role in laying the groundwork for conventional scheduled services. However, once a critical mass of demand is established, transitioning to fixed-route buses becomes essential, as DRT systems cannot indefinitely scale to accommodate growing passenger volumes. Scheduled buses offer far greater capacity and operational efficiency, making them indispensable for meeting sustained and expanded transport demand.

DRT does have a place in rural public transport, particularly in meeting social objectives, but it will not be the appropriate solution for all rural areas. DRT is expensive to provide, and cost-per-passenger can be extremely high, compared to a traditional bus service. These DRT issues were explored in various BCoE webinars and in-person events, including a session with Emeritus Professor Peter White on 'Defining the appropriate roles for DRT services[7]'.

In the past decade, the focus of the DRT sector has been on the technology required to run a DRT scheme; this technology has greatly advanced and has helped local authorities to make some DRT schemes a success. However, this

focus must shift now to making DRT services more financially and operationally viable.

How to make DRT more sustainable and what the Government can do to support:

- **Explore DRT procurement to identify cost cutting measures:**

  o DRT schemes have components that can be standardised and purchased centrally (or regionally), for example, the DRT technology platform (phone app and backend platform, ride-sharing algorithm), payment system processor, call centre operations, marketing and vehicles. Neighbouring Local Transport Authorities can combine their purchasing power when investing in DRT and set up a common platform, allowing each authority to operate their own DRT schemes with different characteristics that reflect local conditions and travel needs (e.g. days/hours of operations, pick-up/drop-off model of operation).

- **Use the lessons learnt from the DfT Rural Mobility Fund and produce detailed guidance on DRT schemes.** There is currently no guidance that can assist authorities to decide:

  o What is more appropriate: provide DRT or support conventional buses? What are the financial and operational implications between the various models of DRT?

  o What to provide: full coverage or optimised operations (impacting on travel/waiting times)?

  o How much to provide: fleet size, operational structure, times and days of operation?

  o When and how should an existing declining bus service be converted into DRT? Equally, guidance is needed to help decide when a successful DRT scheme is converted into a scheduled, conventional bus service.

  o How to best integrate DRT into the wider public transport offering and how to combine various transport services (school transport,

non-emergency patient transport, adult social care transport) at the local level. This can be done by reforming procurement for these types of flexible transport (usually provided using minibuses), instead of each contract being procured individually. This idea is simar to the DfT's Total Transport rural transport development programme[8] which sought to improve co-ordination between different organisations with common transport needs and aims. This typically involved partnership arrangements between local authorities, the health sector, social care providers and transport operators, with the objective of increasing capacity, exploiting benefits of scale and realising cash savings. Although the Total Transport programme is now defunct, technology and contractual arrangements have progressed so the CIHT would welcome a re-visit of Total Transport principles.

- **Regulatory Reforms**:

  o Overhaul operating permits to better reflect the current state of DRT as a flexible transport service or create a new permit specifically for DRT services.

  o CIHT supports a change in VAT rules, which currently mean transport authorities are incentivised to buy larger, 10+ seater vehicles for DRT schemes, as smaller, more carbon-efficient vehicles have VAT applied to fares. The deployment of DRT schemes is therefore more expensive for local authorities, as it means higher purchase, operation and maintenance costs, as well as reducing the environmental benefit of DRT schemes.

- **Capacity Development**: Equip local authorities with the skills and resources (e.g. product management, expertise in procuring digital/cloud-based products, data analytics) needed to implement and oversee non-traditional, flexible transport systems effectively.

g. How successful Enhanced Partnerships (EPs) have been so far in improving bus services outside major urban areas, whether franchising is likely to provide a better framework for these areas, and whether there are alternative models worth exploring.

In July 2024, the Sub-national Transport Bodies (STBs) for the wider South-East area, Transport East (TE), Transport for the South East (TfSE), and England's Economic Heartland (EEH), and the Bus Centre of Excellence (BCoE) brought together Enhanced Partnership (EP) Chairs and Managers and bus operators from across the three regions for a one-day conference. The objective of the conference was to share learnings and experiences and to identify ways to maximise the impact of EPs in the future for the benefit of all, and a summary report on the outcomes of the conference was produced[9].

The event demonstrated how Enhanced Partnerships *can* work as a successful alternative to bus franchising, while delivering dynamic and efficient bus services that better reflect local community needs.

The event explored what Local Transport Authorities need from Central Government to accelerate bus improvements.

This EP Conference was the first of its kind, and BCoE is committed to hold similar events across other regions, in collaboration with the relevant STBs and the DfT.

h. How well policy, funding, and oversight of bus services allow services that straddle rural and non-rural areas, and local government boundaries, to be managed.

Cross-boundary services face significant challenges due to inconsistent policies and fragmented governance structures. This fragmentation, both within and across local authorities, impedes cohesive planning and results in service discontinuities, reduced network efficiency, and duplication of efforts. Such inefficiencies discourage seamless travel and erode passenger confidence in public transport, particularly in rural areas where connectivity is already limited.

To address these challenges, the CIHT recommends establishing new governance frameworks that synchronise planning and operations across transport modes and administrative boundaries. These frameworks should prioritise:

- **Regional collaboration**: provide authority to STBs to oversee and coordinate cross-boundary services to ensure consistent policies and

funding across jurisdictions, facilitating a coherent bus network and seamless integration of bus services.

- **New funding mechanisms**: Develop funding models that encourage collaboration between local authorities that share borders and bus services. Shared investments in cross-boundary bus routes would reduce duplication of effort and ensure that limited resources are allocated efficiently to meet passenger needs.

- **Harmonised timetables**: Align rural bus networks with rail and other transport modes, creating a unified timetable that minimises wait times and simplifies journey planning for passengers. This integration is essential to enhance the attractiveness of public transport.

- **Data-driven decision-making on cross-boundary services**: leverage data analytics to understand travel patterns, identify service gaps, and optimise routes. This approach would help authorities tailor cross-boundary services to actual demand while avoiding over-servicing or underutilisation.

Rural bus networks should not operate in isolation but instead complement and connect with urban transport systems. By aligning bus schedules and routes with rail services, passengers gain access to a cohesive public transport ecosystem that reduces dependency on private vehicles. This integrated approach also supports economic growth by enhancing access to employment hubs, education, and healthcare facilities, thereby improving social inclusion.

January 2025

Endnotes

[1] CIHT (2024) A Transport Network fit for all our futures
[2] CIHT (2024) Ensuring a just transition to net zero transport policy brief
[3] In recognition of the role that buses play for the delivery of Social Value, the DfT commissioned Arup to develop the 'Social Value Toolkit for Buses' to support the delivery of BSIPs. The BCoE supported this initiative with promotion and hosted a launch event for the toolkit.
[4] Transport poverty is when individuals or communities lack affordable, reliable, or accessible transportation options, limiting their ability to participate fully in economic, social, and daily activities.
[5] Campaign for Better Transport (2024), Better Bus Stops: creating a national bus stop standard.
[6] CIHT (2024), Creating a public realm for All
[7] Prof. Peter White (2024), Defining Appropriate Roles for DRT services

[8] Department for Transport (2019) Total Transport: feasibility report & pilot review

[9] Enhanced Partnerships: delivering better services