

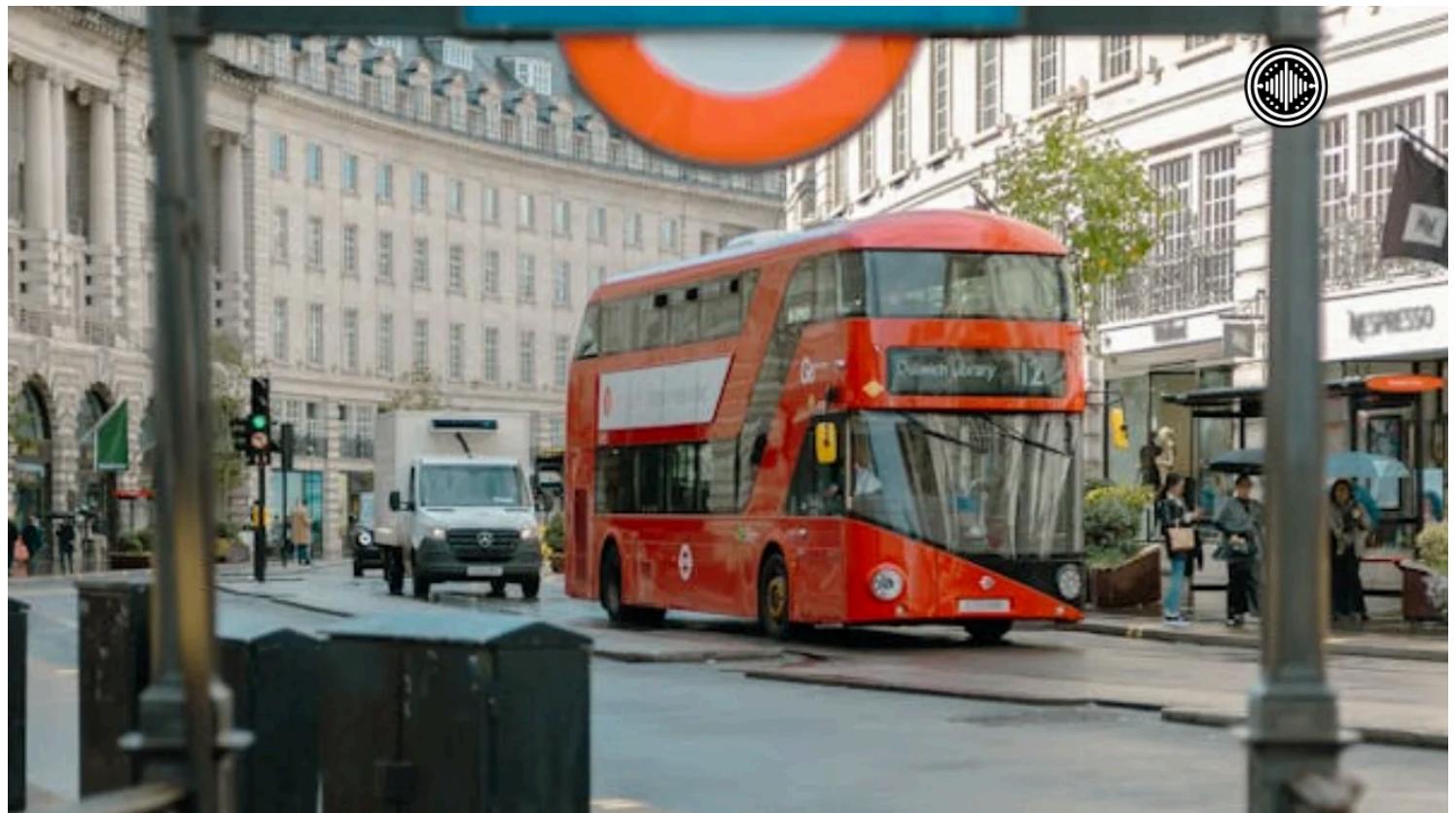
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Public Transport Struggles to Recover as Local Bus Services Fade

June 27, 2025

– Categories: *Economics*



Local bus services in England continue to shrink, despite government investment aimed at improving access and reliability. A new report from the National Audit Office highlights an ongoing decline in coverage and usage, with total bus mileage outside London falling by 15% since 2019. Passenger numbers have also struggled to recover, remaining about 9%

below pre-pandemic levels. The findings point to a persistent gap between funding promises and visible improvements on the ground.

For many local authorities, the challenge goes beyond funding. Nearly half rated their capacity to plan, manage, and deliver bus services as “poor” or “very poor.” Common concerns include traffic congestion, slow travel times, and unreliable service, all factors that discourage regular use. While some central funding has been made available in recent years, much of it has gone toward temporary COVID-19 support, rather than long-term service development or infrastructure upgrades.

The financial model for bus services is also under pressure. Public subsidies now make up about half of operators’ income, amounting to £1.8 billion in 2023–24. This level of reliance raises questions about the viability of services, particularly in rural and suburban areas where lower demand can make routes harder to sustain. The NAO cautions that this could lead to a cycle of decline: as services are reduced, passenger numbers fall further, triggering more cuts.

In response, the government has committed more than £1 billion to strengthen local bus networks and has proposed new legislation to allow councils more control through franchising. However, implementing franchising schemes is often complex and costly, and uptake has been limited so far.

Industry groups acknowledge some positive developments, including a rise in rural ridership in some areas, but say wider issues, like funding certainty and congestion, still need to be addressed. Local government representatives also stress the importance of consistent support if councils are to play a larger role in shaping services.

While the investment marks a step forward, the report makes clear that reversing the long-term decline in bus services will require more than funding alone; it will take coordinated planning, public confidence, and long-term commitment.