

BUS AND PASSENGER SERVICES

HEREFORDSHIRE COUNCIL

**ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE**

BUS AND PASSENGER SERVICES TASK AND FINISH GROUP

FINAL REPORT

Chair's Foreword



Public transport is more than a means of getting from one place to another; it is a fundamental requirement to access opportunity, independence and social connection for people across Herefordshire. For many residents, particularly those living in rural communities, older people, young people and those without access to a car, buses and community transport are essential lifelines. They enable access to work, education, healthcare, shops, social activities and wider regional opportunities. When these services falter, the effects are felt immediately and deeply.

The task and finish group was established to look at how well Herefordshire's transport system is meeting the needs of our communities. Over several months, group members engaged with operators, community transport providers, council officers, neighbouring authorities and residents. They examined the pressures facing the network, the opportunities created by recent investment, and the structural challenges that continue to limit reliability, accessibility and long-term sustainability.

We found a system that is improving, but still fragile. Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) funding has delivered visible benefits, including new services, Sunday provision and upgraded infrastructure. Partnership working has strengthened, and community transport continues to provide exceptional social value. Yet long-standing issues remain. Rural isolation, rising SEND transport costs, limited commercial viability, inconsistent data, constrained powers over commercial operators, and the impact of congestion and roadworks all place significant pressure on the network. These challenges cannot be solved through short-term interventions alone.

The group's recommendations reflect the need for a more strategic and integrated approach to the network. We must strengthen data provision and accountability, improve integration between bus, rail, community transport and school transport, and ensure that passenger information is clear, accessible and reliable. We must prioritise buses in infrastructure planning, maintain strong partnership working, and prepare for future legislative changes. Above all, we must adopt a long-term strategy that recognises the realities of rural transport and supports sustainable mobility for all residents.

I would like to thank all members of the task and finish group, the officers who supported our work, and the operators, advisers and community organisations who contributed their time and expertise. Their insights have been invaluable.

Cllr Justine Peberdy
Chair, Bus Services Task and Finish Group

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Task and Finish Group Members



Cllr Justine Peberdy - Chair

Cllr Justine Peberdy is the Green Party councillor for Ledbury West. She serves as Vice-Chair of the Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee and is Chair of Herefordshire Local Access Forum. She has a professional background in arts, heritage and project management with an interest in sustainable transport, accessibility and rural connectivity issues.



Cllr Polly Andrews

Cllr Polly Andrews is the Liberal Democrat councillor for Widemarsh and currently serves as Chairperson of the Licensing Sub-Committee. She has represented residents on Herefordshire Council since 2011 and brings extensive experience of local government and community service.



Cllr Robert Highfield

Cllr Robert Highfield is the Conservative councillor for Castle Ward. He serves on the Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee, Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee and Audit and Governance Committee.



Cllr Nick Mason

Cllr Nick Mason is the unaligned Councillor for Weobley, representing a large rural ward in north-west Herefordshire. He is a member of the Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee and is actively engaged in local issues including transport, road safety, flooding and rural infrastructure.



Cllr Richard Thomas

Cllr Richard Thomas is the Conservative councillor for Wormside Ward, representing a predominantly rural area in south-west Herefordshire. He serves on the Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee, Health, Care and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee, Planning and Regulatory Committee and the Scrutiny Management Board.



Cllr Rebecca Tully

Cllr Rebecca Tully is the Green Party councillor for Bishops Frome and Cradley and serves as Vice-Chairperson of the Health, Care and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee. Elected in 2024, she has more than 25 years' experience in teaching, training and community development, having worked with the NHS, voluntary organisations, local authorities and community groups.

Acknowledgements

The Bus Services Task and Finish Group wishes to formally express its sincere appreciation to all those who generously contributed their time, insight, and expertise throughout this review.

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Introduction

Herefordshire is one of the most rural unitary authorities in England and faces significant challenges in providing affordable, reliable and accessible public transport. The Herefordshire Council Plan 2024-2028 identifies poor transport connectivity as a major challenge affecting access to employment, education, healthcare, tourism and economic growth.

Public transport provision in Herefordshire has been shaped by long-term demographic, economic and societal changes that have contributed to a sustained decline in bus patronage over recent decades. Department for Transport data shows that local bus passenger journeys in Herefordshire fell from over 3 million journeys per year in 2009/10 to just over 2 million by 2018/19, with passenger journeys per head of population declining by 46% between 2009/10 and 2019/20. This reduction reflects not only changes within the transport network itself but also wider societal trends, including increased car ownership, changing patterns of employment, the growth of online shopping, greater remote and hybrid working, and the challenges of maintaining viable services across a large and sparsely populated rural county. While recent investment through the Bus Service Improvement Plan has helped improve and protect parts of the network, the long-term decline in bus use demonstrates the scale of the challenge facing public transport in Herefordshire and highlights the need for a sustainable and integrated approach to future transport provision.

The Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee therefore established a task and finish group to examine bus and community transport provision across the county.

Terms of Reference

The review sought to examine:

- How Herefordshire Council currently uses its powers and responsibilities to shape bus provision.
- How other rural authorities deliver passenger transport.
- Whether funding is being used effectively.
- Delivery of the Bus Service Improvement Plan.
- The effectiveness of Enhanced Partnership arrangements.
- Opportunities arising from the Bus Services Act 2025.
- Cross-county and cross-border connectivity.
- The role of the Marches Forward Partnership.
- Community transport opportunities.
- Demand Responsive Transport opportunities.
- Future funding and delivery models.

Evidence Gathered

The group received evidence from:

- Herefordshire Council officers
- Commercial bus operators/Enhanced Partnership
- Community transport providers
- Neighbouring authorities
- National guidance and legislation
- Passenger/resident feedback
- The Marches Forward Partnership
- Network user apps

The chapters that follow examine the council's existing transport powers and responsibilities, current funding arrangements, recent service improvements and opportunities for future development, before presenting the group's conclusions and recommendations.

Existing Powers and Responsibilities

The Herefordshire Transport Context

Herefordshire's public transport network operates within one of the most rural areas of England, where dispersed communities, low population density and long journey distances make it difficult to sustain frequent commercial bus services. The network is delivered through a mix of commercial bus services, council-supported routes, school and [Special Educational Needs and Disability](#) (SEND) transport, [community transport](#) and cross-border services, creating a complex system with multiple funding and operational arrangements.

Commercial vs Council Supported Services

The review highlighted the important distinction between subsidised and commercial bus services. Where Herefordshire Council provides financial support for a service, it can specify routes, timetables, vehicle standards, ticketing arrangements, reporting requirements and performance expectations through contractual agreements. These arrangements enable the council to monitor performance and exercise direct influence over service quality where public funding is provided.

By contrast, wholly commercial services operate within the deregulated bus market. Decisions relating to routes, fares, frequencies and service levels remain primarily the responsibility of operators, and the council's influence is largely limited to partnership working, infrastructure investment and constructive engagement. Oversight of operator performance is provided through the national regulatory framework administered by the [Traffic Commissioners](#).

This distinction is important because it shapes both accountability and the council's ability to intervene. Members found that the council possesses significant powers where services are publicly supported but has more limited influence over commercial operations. As a result, the effectiveness of partnership working and the availability of reliable performance information are critical to understanding how well the wider network is functioning and where investment can deliver the greatest benefit. As a result of these fundamental points, much of this report focuses on how the council manages the challenges of data analysis and partnership work to drive improvements to bus services at a time of declining patronage and short-term funding.

Existing and Future Funding

The group examined how passenger transport funding is used across Herefordshire and whether current investment delivers value for residents and communities.

The Economics of Rural Transport

The evidence demonstrated that many bus services providing substantial social and economic benefits are not commercially viable and require public subsidy. This reflects the realities of serving a predominantly rural county, where dispersed populations and longer journey distances increase operating costs and reduce passenger demand. Transport investment therefore supports access to employment, education, healthcare, retail services and social opportunities, benefits that are not fully captured by cost-per-passenger measures alone.

Funding Sources

Funding is drawn from a range of sources including the former Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP), funding, the [Local Authority Bus Grant](#) (LABG), concessionary fare reimbursement, [community transport grants](#) and school transport budgets. The introduction of LABG marks a significant change to national bus funding arrangements, consolidating previous Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) and Local Authority [Bus Service Operators Grant](#) (BSOG) funding into a longer-term settlement for local transport authorities. Multi-year allocations through to 2029/30 provide greater certainty for service planning and investment than previous short-term funding arrangements.

BSIP Investment in Herefordshire

The group found that Herefordshire Council has been proactive in securing and delivering Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) funding to address long-standing transport challenges associated with rurality, geographic isolation and reliance on private car travel. The investment secured through BSIP has enabled improvements that would not have been achievable through the council's core transport budget alone.

BSIP funding has supported the introduction of new services and enhancements to existing routes, including the provision of Sunday services where none previously existed. It has also encouraged visitor use of the network. Members heard that these improvements have increased access to employment, education, healthcare, retail and leisure opportunities, particularly for residents without access to a private vehicle. In a rural county, even relatively modest improvements in service availability can have a significant impact on accessibility and social inclusion.

The review found that BSIP investment has also improved the overall passenger experience through upgrades to bus shelters, accessibility improvements at bus stops, the installation of 31 solar-powered real-time information displays and enhancements to digital journey-planning tools. These improvements have made public transport more visible, accessible and attractive, particularly for older people and passengers with disabilities.

Members welcomed the progress made but noted that passengers can still experience difficulties obtaining clear information during service disruptions, roadworks and temporary diversions. An agreed protocol across all operators and Herefordshire Council to advise passengers of disruptions to service would be beneficial. A single point of contact for feedback would also improve passenger experience and give Herefordshire Council oversight of the network's functionality.

The group concluded that BSIP funding has been used effectively and has delivered visible benefits across the network. However, many recent improvements have relied on time-limited external funding, creating uncertainty about their long-term sustainability. Members considered it important that the council continues to evaluate the impact of funded initiatives, strengthen its evidence base and target future investment towards interventions that deliver the greatest benefits for residents and businesses in the community. Maintaining recent improvements will require a long-term approach that aligns future funding opportunities with wider transport priorities and network development.

Recommendation: Improve Passenger Information and Minimise Service Disruption

The council and operators should improve real-time information, disruption communications, timetable information and digital journey-planning tools. Highway works should be planned and coordinated to minimise impacts on bus reliability and ensure passengers receive clear and timely information during service disruptions.

Establish a single, council-led point of contact for passenger feedback, complaints and service suggestions to improve accountability, identify recurring issues and provide greater oversight of network performance.

Moving from BSIP to LABG

Recent investment through the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) has delivered enhancements to bus services, passenger facilities, travel information and accessibility across the county. From 2026/27, BSIP funding will be incorporated within the new Local Authority Bus Grant (LABG), a consolidated funding stream that combines previous BSIP and Local Authority Bus Service Operators' Grant allocations, providing greater flexibility and longer-term funding certainty for local transport authorities.

LABG allocations are determined through a national formula that reflects factors such as population, deprivation, rurality and accessibility rather than local authority performance. As a result, opportunities to influence future funding levels directly are limited. The key challenge is therefore to maximise the benefits of the funding available through effective planning, strong partnership working and robust, evidence-based investment decisions.

The flexibility offered by LABG presents opportunities to align investment with local priorities, including the support of socially necessary services, accessibility improvements, enhanced passenger facilities and the development of innovative transport solutions where there is a clear and demonstrable need.

The transition to LABG provides a more stable funding environment and an opportunity to move from short-term interventions towards longer-term network development. Achieving this will require stronger performance data, a clearer understanding of passenger demand and a strategic approach that aligns investment with accessibility, rural connectivity and wider transport objectives.

The Enhanced Partnership

The improvements delivered through BSIP funding did not occur in isolation. Their success has depended heavily on effective collaboration between Herefordshire Council, bus operators and other transport partners. Recognising that these relationships have been central to recent progress, the group examined the effectiveness of the Enhanced Partnership and the extent to which its governance arrangements support performance, accountability and continuous improvement across the network.

Purpose of Enhanced Partnership

An Enhanced Partnership (EP) is a formal statutory arrangement between a local transport authority and local bus operators, established under the Bus Services Act 2017. It provides a framework through which councils and operators work together to improve bus services, infrastructure and the overall passenger experience.

The EP is the principal mechanism through which Herefordshire Council and local operators collaborate to improve transport services across the county. It supports joint working on service planning, passenger information, infrastructure improvements, reliability, accessibility and the delivery of Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) initiatives.

Partnership Working in Herefordshire

Throughout the review, officers described engagement with operators as constructive and increasingly focused on solutions. Members heard that relationships have strengthened significantly in recent years, with greater collaboration on network changes, infrastructure projects and responses to operational challenges. This was particularly evident during discussions relating to roadworks, service disruptions and the implementation of BSIP-funded improvements.

Review Findings

The group found that the Enhanced Partnership is a significant strength within Herefordshire's transport arrangements. It has enabled stronger relationships between the council and operators, supported the delivery of network improvements and provided a constructive forum for addressing operational challenges. Members identified the role of the Enhanced Partnership in supporting operators to engage with government intervention schemes such as the Summer Bus Fare Offer and the £2 bus fare cap. The investigation also demonstrated that contractual arrangements for subsidised services provide a more robust foundation for performance monitoring and accountability than members had initially understood.

However, the full benefits of these arrangements will only be realised where performance information is collected consistently, routinely analysed and openly shared. As the council responds to future transport challenges and the opportunities created by the [Bus Services Act 2025](#), the Enhanced Partnership should evolve from a forum primarily focused on collaboration into one that combines collaboration with clear accountability, consistent performance reporting and evidence-led decision making. This will strengthen governance, improve transparency and support continuous improvement across the network.

Recommendation: Strengthen the Enhanced Partnership.

The Enhanced Partnership should develop a more structured approach to performance monitoring, accountability and data sharing, and should include structured engagement with Community Transport Providers as part of partnership discussions and future accessibility planning. Regular reporting and agreed performance measures will help support evidence-led decision-making, collaborative problem solving and continuous improvement across the network.

Data and Performance Management

The majority of routes in Herefordshire are subsidised giving Herefordshire Council an opportunity to improve data collection and compliance and build up a comprehensive picture of the whole network. In addition, officers explained that the council is already developing enhanced monitoring arrangements through the integration of ticketing, patronage, operational and financial datasets. This includes the use of [Smart Applications Management](#), (SAM) ticketing data and [Via operational information](#) to improve understanding of passenger demand, service performance, revenue generation and subsidy requirements. The group welcomed this work and considered it an important step towards a more evidence-led transport network. The [Bus Open Data Service](#) (BODS) provides data on fares, timetable, live vehicle location and patronage. There is concern that BODS is currently not accurately reflecting this data meaning that passenger information on platforms such as [bustimes.org](#) and real-time information (RTI) displays can be unreliable.

Contractual Accountability

As part of its investigation, the group also examined the contractual arrangements governing subsidised bus services and the extent to which these provide mechanisms for performance monitoring and accountability. Members initially experienced difficulties obtaining contract and tender documentation, limiting their ability to scrutinise service requirements and performance arrangements. However, the subsequent provision of sample contracts, tender information and contract award documentation enabled a more detailed assessment of current arrangements.

Data and Performance Monitoring

The documentation reviewed demonstrated that more recent subsidised contracts contain a number of requirements designed to support performance monitoring and accountability. These include obligations on operators to provide revenue and patronage data, detailed passenger information generated through electronic ticket machines, punctuality data and vehicle location information to support real-time passenger information systems. Operators are also required to use electronic ticket machines compatible with [Bus Open Data Service](#) (BODS) requirements and capable of supporting real-time tracking feeds.

The documents indicated that contracts provide for ongoing compliance monitoring by the council. Operators are required to provide requested information within defined timescales and compliance checks are expected to be undertaken throughout the contract period. Performance monitoring is supported through contractual conditions and service performance standards.

Whilst specific key performance indicators (KPIs) were not explicitly identified within the documentation reviewed, members considered that the requirement to provide punctuality, reliability, patronage and revenue data creates a strong basis for meaningful KPI development. The information available would allow the council to assess whether services are operating as timetabled, whether passenger numbers are changing and whether public subsidy is delivering value for money.

Procurement and Future Contract Design

Officers explained that existing procurement arrangements place significant emphasis on cost. Members heard that future contractual arrangements could place greater emphasis on quality outcomes, including passenger growth, network integration, accessibility and participation in national fare initiatives. The group considered that future procurement frameworks should seek to balance value for money with wider transport objectives.

Opportunities for Improvement

The review identified persistent challenges relating to data consistency, performance reporting and transparency. Information is not always provided in a standard format, making it difficult to compare services, evaluate interventions or assess the overall effectiveness of investment across the network. Members considered that this limits both strategic planning and effective scrutiny.

Recommendation: Strengthen Public Transport Data and Evidence

The council should strengthen the collection, analysis and sharing of transport data across the passenger transport network, making full use of existing fleet technology, real-time vehicle tracking and ticketing systems to improve performance monitoring, compliance management and evidence-based decision-making. This should include information on passenger demand, reliability, punctuality, subsidy levels, rural travel patterns and SEND transport pressures, enabling greater accountability, more effective targeting of investment and stronger long-term transport planning.

Opportunities Created by the Bus Services Act 2025

While the review identified opportunities to strengthen existing partnership arrangements, the wider policy landscape is also evolving. The introduction of the [Bus Services Act 2025](#) represents the most significant change to local bus governance in England for many years, providing local transport authorities with a wider range of powers to influence, manage and protect local bus networks. Key provisions include expanded franchising powers, stronger protections for socially necessary services, enhanced requirements relating to accessibility and data sharing, and the removal of restrictions on local authority-owned bus companies.

The Act removes previous barriers to franchising by making franchising powers available to all local transport authorities in England without requiring Secretary of State consent. This could enable authorities to exercise greater control over routes, fares, service standards and network integration where appropriate. The group recognised that franchising is unlikely to provide an immediate solution for Herefordshire, given its dispersed rural geography, relatively small passenger market and financial constraints. However, the availability of these powers provides an important future option should existing arrangements fail to meet community needs.

The Act requires enhanced partnership plans to identify socially necessary services and consider mitigation where service reductions or withdrawals would significantly affect access to employment, education, healthcare, essential services or social opportunities. Members considered this particularly relevant to Herefordshire, where some rural services generate relatively low passenger numbers but provide substantial social value and help reduce isolation. The new framework offers greater scope to identify and protect services that are essential to local communities.

The legislation also strengthens expectations around evidence-based decision-making by expanding powers to collect data on passenger demand, service performance, vehicle usage and operating costs. Given the recurring concerns identified throughout the review regarding data quality, performance reporting and visibility of commercial services, members considered these provisions a significant opportunity to improve strategic planning, accountability and investment decisions.

The Act introduces requirements for local transport authorities to publish a [Bus Network Accessibility Plan](#) (BNAP) and places greater emphasis on the needs of disabled passengers within transport planning and Enhanced Partnership arrangements.

Members considered these provisions increasingly important in light of Herefordshire's ageing population, growing mobility needs and reliance on community transport services. Members agreed that BNAP should be integrated into future network planning, contract management and partnership arrangements from an early stage.

The Act permits authorities to establish local authority-owned bus companies, further expanding the range of potential delivery models available in the future, although no evidence was presented that this would currently be appropriate for Herefordshire.

Implications for Herefordshire

The group found that the Bus Services Act 2025 does not remove the underlying challenges associated with rural transport provision, financial pressures or commercial viability. However, it provides a significantly stronger framework for protecting socially necessary services, improving accessibility, strengthening data and accountability arrangements, and giving local authorities greater influence over their networks.

Review Findings

For Herefordshire, the most immediate opportunities are likely to arise from enhanced partnership working, better use of data, stronger accessibility planning and more effective network management rather than large-scale structural reform. The council should continue monitoring implementation guidance and ensure its transport strategies, governance arrangements and data systems are prepared to take advantage of the opportunities created by the new legislative framework. The [Herefordshire Council Local Transport Plan](#) (LTP5) provides the principal mechanism through which elected members can influence transport priorities and funding decisions. The group considered it important that transport strategy development and public transport investment remain subject to strong democratic oversight.

Recommendation: Timely BNAP Integration

The council should ensure that future transport contracts, network planning and investment decisions align with the requirements of the Bus Network Accessibility Plan and actively involve disabled passengers and community transport providers in its development.

Other Local Authorities

Although the Bus Services Act 2025 provides an important framework for future transport development, legislation alone cannot determine how successful local transport networks will be. The practical application of policy, funding and partnership arrangements remains equally important. To better understand what approaches may be effective in a rural context, the group considered examples of innovation and good practice from other authorities facing similar challenges.

The group reviewed evidence from a range of authorities facing similar challenges to Herefordshire. Whilst no authority operates in exactly the same circumstances, common themes emerged from the examples considered.

Worcestershire on Demand

Members considered the experiences of Worcestershire County Council, which has implemented a [demand responsive transport](#) (DRT) model through its [Worcestershire on Demand](#) service. Evidence suggested that this approach has enabled transport services to be delivered in areas where conventional fixed-route bus services do not exist.

Integrated Transport Models

The group also examined examples of integrated transport planning, including the [Transport for Cornwall Partnership](#), which brings together school transport, mainstream public transport and wider transport services within a coordinated operational model. This approach seeks to maximise vehicle utilisation, reduce duplication and improve value for money.

Applicability to Herefordshire

The review highlighted that there is no single transport model that Herefordshire can simply replicate. However, examples from elsewhere demonstrate that successful rural transport systems require flexibility, innovation and long-term planning.

The most important lesson identified by the group is that effective transport planning must be integrated across all forms of passenger transport rather than considering bus services in isolation.

A key lesson emerging from the evidence was that authorities achieving the most positive outcomes tended to demonstrate several common characteristics:

- Long-term transport strategies
- Strong performance management.
- Effective use of data.
- Greater integration across transport modes.
- Strong collaborative relationships with operators and neighbouring authorities.

Recommendation: Adopt an Evidence-Led Approach to Rural Mobility Innovation

The council should explore more appropriate supply to rural transport and other emerging rural mobility solutions only where there is clear evidence of passenger demand, value for money and compatibility with existing transport provision. Any future initiatives should be subject to robust evaluation.

Cross-Border Connectivity and the Marches Forward Partnership

The examples considered highlighted the importance of collaboration beyond administrative boundaries. Residents frequently travel outside Herefordshire for employment, education, healthcare, retail and leisure purposes. Visitors to Herefordshire also provide a buoyant market segment, e.g. the Hereford to Hay on Wye service. The group therefore examined the role of cross-border connectivity and regional partnership working in supporting an integrated transport network.

Cross Border Challenges

The evidence demonstrated that transport demand within Herefordshire does not align neatly with administrative boundaries. Residents routinely travel into Worcestershire, Gloucestershire, Shropshire and Wales to access employment and leisure opportunities, education providers, healthcare facilities and transport interchanges. In practical terms, many residents experience transport as a regional network rather than a county network.

Evidence gathered during the review indicated that this creates particular challenges when transport planning remains largely organised around individual authority boundaries. Several examples emerged where services important to passengers cross multiple funding, governance or policy jurisdictions. Different reimbursement arrangements, service priorities and funding pressures can create barriers to integrated planning.

The review identified opportunities to improve:

- Cross-border bus connectivity
- Bus and rail integration
- Timetable coordination
- Regional transport planning
- Joint funding opportunities through the Marches Forward Partnership

Bus and Rail

The group considered that rail connectivity provides a particularly clear illustration of this challenge. Hereford, Ledbury and Leominster stations function as regional transport hubs, but bus and rail timetables are not always coordinated. Evidence presented to the members indicated that relatively small timetable changes could improve connectivity and increase the attractiveness of public transport for longer journeys.

The Marches Forward Partnership

Members further considered that the [Marches Forward Partnership](#) offers significant opportunities to support joint transport planning, shared research and demand analysis, collaborative funding bids, cross-boundary mobility pilots and strategic coordination of transport priorities.

Transport needs cannot be considered solely within county boundaries. Stronger regional collaboration will be essential to improving accessibility and connectivity for residents. The review found that transport is one of the policy areas most likely to benefit from genuine regional collaboration and that the Marches Forward Partnership could provide an important mechanism for delivering this ambition.

Recommendation: Improve Integration Between Bus and Rail Services.

The council should work with bus and rail operators to improve connections at interchange points, particularly Hereford, Ledbury and Leominster stations, through better timetable coordination, passenger information, wayfinding and journey planning. Improved integration will make public transport more convenient and attractive for longer journeys.

School, SEND and Social Care Transport

Throughout the evidence gathering process, one issue emerged consistently as both a financial challenge and a transport planning challenge: the rising cost and complexity of school, SEND and social care transport, with forecast expenditure of approximately £15 million on SEND transport alone, with a projected overspend of around £3 million in 2025/26. Given the scale of expenditure involved and its growing impact on the wider transport budget, the group considered it necessary to examine this area in more detail.

Published council financial reports consistently identify rising demand for SEND services and home-to-school transport as key budget pressures. These demand-led costs increasingly affect wider passenger transport planning and place additional pressure on available resources.

Current Reform Activity

The group recognises that home-to-school transport is currently undergoing significant transformation, including refreshed transport policies, procurement reform and wider service modernisation.

When meeting with transport officers, the group heard about opportunities for improved route planning, vehicle utilisation, scheduling and coordination across school transport, SEND transport, adult social care transport, community transport and mainstream passenger services. Evidence gathered from other authorities suggests that more integrated transport models can improve efficiency, maximise vehicle utilisation and reduce service duplication.

Members also noted opportunities to expand alternative transport approaches where appropriate, including greater consideration of Personal Transport Budgets and independent travel arrangements. Existing Herefordshire Council policy already supports these approaches in appropriate circumstances and recognises their potential benefits for both families and service sustainability.

The group also concluded that social care transport should not be considered separately from wider passenger transport planning. For example, community transport providers already undertake substantial numbers of healthcare and independent living journeys and play an important preventative role within the wider care system.

Review Findings

The review concluded that school, SEND and social care transport should form a central component of any future integrated passenger transport strategy, supported by stronger data analysis, coordinated planning and a whole-system approach to transport delivery.

Community Transport

The Role of Community Transport

Community transport providers deliver essential services for older residents, people with mobility difficulties, patients making healthcare journeys, and rural communities without access to traditional bus services.

Community Transport as Social Infrastructure

The review highlighted the importance of community transport. The group heard compelling evidence that community transport provides considerably more than a transport service. In many cases it represents a wider social support function that helps residents remain connected to their communities and maintain independence.

Impact and Outcomes

Data provided during the review indicated that around three-quarters of users are over the age of 75 and that between 60 and 80 per cent of journeys are health related. During 2025/26, community transport providers supported more than 32,000 passenger journeys across the county, with many journeys linked to healthcare access, shopping and independent living. This suggests that community transport plays a significant preventative role within the wider health and care system.

Evidence gathered during the review suggested that if community transport services were no longer available, additional costs would almost certainly fall upon public services elsewhere, including adult social care, healthcare transport, social prescribing programmes and community wellbeing initiatives.

The review therefore reinforced the view that community transport should not be viewed simply as a low-volume transport provider but as an important component of the county's wider social infrastructure.

Sustainability Challenges

Challenges facing community transport include:

- Financial sustainability
- Volunteer recruitment
- Ageing fleets
- Governance and capacity issues

Evidence also demonstrated significant sustainability risks. Many organisations rely heavily on volunteers, ageing trustee boards and grant funding. Several providers highlighted succession planning, volunteer recruitment, governance capacity and organisational resilience as major concerns.

Accessible minibuses now frequently cost in excess of £100,000, creating substantial capital pressures for relatively small charitable organisations. Members concluded that long-term sustainability will depend not only on financial support, but also on strengthening governance arrangements, organisational capacity, volunteer pipelines and strategic integration with the wider transport network.

Community Transport in Future planning

The review found that community transport providers are increasingly recognised in Department for Transport legislation and should be viewed as a core and strategic component of Herefordshire's transport network rather than as a separate sector. The group considered that community transport should have a stronger voice within strategic transport governance arrangements and be heavily involved in shaping future BNAP planning.

Recommendation: Strengthen and sustain not for profit operators including those licensed as community transport operators.

The council should recognise not for profit operators as a strategic component of Herefordshire's passenger transport network by strengthening its representation within the Enhanced Partnership, ensuring meaningful involvement in Bus Network Accessibility Plan development and wider accessibility planning, maintaining appropriate financial support, and supporting long-term organisational sustainability through fleet renewal, volunteer development and capacity building. Community transport should be fully integrated into wider transport planning as a key contributor to accessibility, social inclusion and independent living.

Future Transport Opportunities

The transition from short-term funding mechanisms towards multi-year Local Authority Bus Grant funding provides an opportunity for longer-term transport planning and investment. Greater funding certainty enables the council and operators to consider strategic improvements rather than relying solely on short-term interventions.

Harnessing New Technologies

Advances in technology are creating new opportunities to improve network efficiency and passenger experience. Developments in real-time analytics, artificial intelligence, predictive scheduling, integrated ticketing, automated passenger information systems and intelligent traffic management have the potential to improve reliability and support more effective deployment of resources.

Members recognised the role of technology in supporting bus priority measures. The use of intelligent traffic signal systems and other highway technologies can help reduce delays and improve journey time reliability, particularly on heavily trafficked corridors.

Environmental Benefits

The transition to lower-emission and zero-emission vehicles will also remain a key consideration for future transport planning. Decarbonisation objectives should be pursued alongside accessibility, affordability and service sustainability to ensure environmental benefits are achieved without reducing transport connectivity for rural communities.

Supporting Young People's Mobility

Members recognised the importance of affordable transport for young people accessing education, employment, training, leisure opportunities and social activities. The group's discussions aligned strongly with the ambitions of Child Friendly Herefordshire, which seeks to improve opportunities and outcomes for children and young people across the county.

The proposed pilot to extend free evening and weekend bus travel for 16 to 19 year olds was identified as an example of how targeted transport initiatives may support social inclusion, educational participation and employment opportunities. Members emphasised the importance of collecting robust evidence from pilot schemes to assess impacts on passenger behaviour, accessibility and value for money. Such evidence can strengthen future business cases and support opportunities to secure external funding.

Future innovation should be guided by evidence, robust evaluation and clear passenger need.

Recommendation: Develop a Long-Term Integrated Transport Strategy as part of the daughter documents of the Local Transport Plan. The council should prepare a long-term strategy for passenger transport that brings together network development, rural mobility, integration across transport modes, accessibility, decarbonisation, technological innovation, funding, governance and regional collaboration. The strategy should provide a clear framework for future decision-making, investment, workforce challenges, vehicle flexibility and alternative operating models, ensuring that Herefordshire's transport network remains sustainable, inclusive and responsive to future opportunities and challenges.

Conclusions

The task and finish group found that Herefordshire's transport network provides an essential lifeline for residents, businesses and communities across the county, but faces significant and growing challenges arising from its rural geography, dispersed population, changing travel patterns and increasing demand for specialist transport services. Throughout the review, members heard consistent evidence of the importance of transport in supporting access to employment, education, healthcare, shopping and social opportunities, particularly for those living in more isolated rural areas.

Evidence gathered during the review demonstrated a strong commitment from Herefordshire Council, commercial operators, rail partners and community transport providers to maintain and improve accessibility despite operating within one of the most rural transport environments in England. Recent investment, partnership working and service improvements have strengthened elements of the network, while community transport continues to make a valuable contribution to reducing isolation and supporting independence for residents who may otherwise struggle to access essential services.

The review highlighted a number of positive developments, including improvements to bus services, passenger facilities, travel information and accessibility, alongside a growing recognition of the role that public and community transport can play in supporting wider economic, environmental and social objectives. Members also found evidence of constructive collaboration between transport providers and the council, creating a stronger foundation for future service development.

However, the review identified a number of strategic challenges that will require continued attention. These include the long-term sustainability of rural services, increasing demand for SEND and other specialist transport provision, the need to make best use of available funding, and the importance of maintaining accessibility for communities that may be at risk of transport disadvantage. The group also identified the need for stronger and more consistent performance information to support evidence-based decision making and enable clearer assessment of transport outcomes.

A recurring theme throughout the review was that passenger transport services continue to be planned, commissioned and managed through a number of separate systems. Bus services, rail, school transport, SEND transport, adult social care transport and community transport often serve similar communities and travel needs but are not always considered as part of a single, integrated transport network. Members concluded that greater coordination between these services could improve efficiency, enhance accessibility and deliver better outcomes for passengers.

The review also identified opportunities arising from the Bus Services Act 2025 and the transition to the Local Authority Bus Grant (LABG), which together provide a stronger framework for local transport planning, service development and accountability. While these changes do not remove the underlying challenges associated with rural transport provision, they offer additional tools and greater flexibility to support locally determined priorities and improve network resilience.

The group therefore concludes that the next phase of transport development in Herefordshire should focus on creating a more integrated, accessible and sustainable passenger transport system that is planned strategically around the needs of residents and communities. Delivering this ambition will require strong governance, effective partnerships, improved data and performance monitoring, enhanced regional collaboration and a clear long-term vision for the county's transport network.

Ultimately, transport should be viewed not simply as a means of moving people from one place to another, but as essential infrastructure that underpins economic growth, educational opportunity, access to healthcare, social inclusion, community resilience and quality of life. The recommendations contained within this report provide a framework for strengthening that role and helping to ensure that Herefordshire's transport system remains responsive, connected and sustainable over the coming decade.

Recommendations

A. Governance, Data and Performance

Recommendation: Strengthen Public Transport Data and Evidence

The council should strengthen the collection, analysis and sharing of transport data across the passenger transport network, making full use of existing fleet technology, real-time vehicle tracking and ticketing systems to improve performance monitoring, compliance management and evidence-based decision-making. This should include information on passenger demand, reliability, punctuality, subsidy levels, rural travel patterns and SEND transport pressures, enabling greater accountability, more effective targeting of investment and stronger long-term transport planning.

Recommendation: Strengthen the Enhanced Partnership

The Enhanced Partnership should develop a more structured approach to performance monitoring, accountability and data sharing, and should include structured engagement with Community Transport Providers as part of partnership discussions and future accessibility planning. Regular reporting and agreed performance measures will help support evidence-led decision-making, collaborative problem solving and continuous improvement across the network.

B. Accessibility and Passenger Experience

Recommendation: Improve Passenger Information and Minimise Service Disruption

The council and operators should improve real-time information, disruption communications, timetable information and digital journey-planning tools. Highway works should be planned and coordinated to minimise impacts on bus reliability and ensure passengers receive clear and timely information during service disruptions.

Establish a single, council-led point of contact for passenger feedback, complaints and service suggestions to improve accountability, identify recurring issues and provide greater oversight of network performance.

Recommendation: Timely BNAP Integration

The council should ensure that future transport contracts, network planning and investment decisions align with the requirements of the Bus Network Accessibility Plan and actively involve disabled passengers and community transport providers in its development.

C. Network Integration and Connectivity

Recommendation: Improve Integration Between Bus and Rail Services

The council should work with bus and rail operators to improve connections at interchange points, particularly Hereford, Leominster and Ledbury stations, through better timetable coordination, passenger information, wayfinding and journey planning. Improved integration will make public transport more convenient and attractive for longer journeys.

Recommendation: Strengthen and sustain not for profit operators including those licensed as community transport operators

The council should recognise not for profit operators as a strategic component of Herefordshire's passenger transport network by strengthening its representation within the Enhanced Partnership, ensuring meaningful involvement in Bus Network Accessibility Plan development and wider accessibility planning, maintaining appropriate financial support, and supporting long-term organisational sustainability through fleet renewal, volunteer development and capacity building. Community transport should be fully integrated into wider transport planning as a key contributor to accessibility, social inclusion and independent living.

D. Long-Term Planning and Innovation

Recommendation: Develop a Long-Term Integrated Transport Strategy as part of the daughter documents of the Local Transport Plan

The council should prepare a long-term strategy for passenger transport that brings together network development, rural mobility, integration across transport modes, accessibility, decarbonisation, technological innovation, funding, governance and regional collaboration. The strategy should provide a clear framework for future decision-making, investment, workforce challenges, vehicle flexibility and alternative operating models, ensuring that Herefordshire's transport network remains sustainable, inclusive and responsive to future opportunities and challenges.

Recommendation: Adopt an Evidence-Led Approach to Rural Mobility Innovation

The council should explore more appropriate supply to rural transport and other emerging rural mobility solutions only where there is clear evidence of passenger demand, value for money and compatibility with existing transport provision. Any future initiatives should be subject to robust evaluation.

Glossary

BODS	Bus Open Data Service	The Bus Open Data Service (BODS) provides bus timetable, vehicle location and fares data for every local bus service in England.
BNAP	Bus Network Accessibility Plan	A statutory plan required under the Bus Services Act 2025 to help local transport authorities assess and improve the accessibility of their bus networks for disabled passengers and other users with accessibility needs.
BSIP	Bus Service Improvement Plan	A government-funded programme requiring local transport authorities to set out plans for improving local bus services and passenger experience.
BSOG	Bus Service Operators Grant	Government funding paid to eligible bus operators to help support the provision of local bus services.
DFT	Department for Transport	The UK Government department responsible for transport policy, funding and regulation in England.
DRT	Demand Responsive Transport	A flexible transport service that operates according to passenger demand rather than fixed routes and timetables.
EP	Enhanced Partnership	A statutory partnership between a local transport authority and bus operators designed to improve local bus services collaboratively.
KPI	Key Performance Indicator	A measurable value used to assess the performance and effectiveness of services or activities.
LABG	Local Authority Bus Grant	Government funding allocated to local authorities to support local bus services and reduce service pressures.
LTP5	Local Transport Plan 5	Herefordshire Council's current local transport strategy, setting out long-term transport priorities and investment plans.
RTI	Real-Time Information	Live passenger information systems that provide up-to-date information on bus arrivals, departures and service disruptions.
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities	Refers to children and young people who require additional educational support and may be eligible for specialist transport provision.
SAM	Smart Applications Management	A ticketing and transport data platform used to support monitoring of patronage, revenue and service performance.