

Zero emission buses and air quality in Sheffield

Westminster Hall debate briefing

5 December 2023



Background

- In recent years bus journeys have been in decline across most of England. The pandemic led to a steeper decline in bus usage and [DfT data shows journeys have yet to fully recover to pre-pandemic levels](#). Despite this, buses remain the most used form of public transport and have often been cited as an important backbone for local communities.
- A report by the [National Audit Office](#) finds bus services are related to the priorities of two-thirds of government departments, as well as pivotal to the government's 2050 net zero target and national Levelling-Up agenda.
- The [National Bus Strategy](#) for England, published in March 2021, aims to elevate services across England closer to London standards and puts forward measures to increase services, providing simpler and cheaper fares, more accessible services and aims to increase the uptake of zero emission buses (ZEBs). The Strategy required all [79 local transport authorities](#) to publish a local Bus Service Improvement Plan to achieve their goals.
- ZEBs provide a route forward for meeting net zero and tackling air quality. In 2019, [55% of UK greenhouse gas emissions resulted from private car use, compared to only 2.5% from buses and coaches](#).
- In March 2022, the [Government announced it was on track to deliver the Prime Minister's goal for 4000 ZEBs](#) and so far funding has been provided for 2,000 of these buses. Government is currently [consulting on setting a date between 2025-2032](#) for ending the sale of new non-zero emission buses.
- Out of the 4,000 committed to, only [87 ZEBs are currently on the road outside of London](#).

Do councils have enough control to deliver zero emission buses?

- Government say that Enhanced Partnerships provide authorities with a greater role in planning services and provides [a faster and cheaper route for delivery](#).
- However, some argue the partnerships do not provide sufficient control for local transport authorities, as operators dictate routes and fares.
- Alternative models, such as franchising, has led to a world class bus network in London, as well as success for municipal operators in Nottingham and Reading.

How are buses funded and is it sufficient?

- Bus services are funded through central and local government and income from fares. For example, between 2018/19 [59% of income was received from fare-paying passengers and 41% from public money](#). Government funding sources include the Bus Service Operators Grant, local authority funding for subsidised services and funding to reimburse operators for concessionary fares.
- Many Local Transport Authorities did not receive sufficient funding to deliver on their bus service improvement plans from central government. In the first round of funding awarded, [only a quarter of funding requested by Local Authorities was delivered](#).

What barriers limit the uptake of zero emission buses?

- A fully-operating ZEB network depends on the availability of charging infrastructure and the supply of electricity. Battery-electric buses require reliable grid capacity and while it is faster to refuel a hydrogen bus, some also make the case that [hydrogen should be reserved for hard to abate industries like aviation and shipping](#).
- Adequate funding for ZEBs will be crucial. Groups such as [Campaign for Better Transport](#) have called for funding shortfalls to be met by reallocating money away from carbon intensive transport, such as road building, to fund zero emission buses.

Why are zero emission buses needed to achieve net zero and improve air quality?

- Encouraging modal shift away from private car use towards bus travel provides a fast route to reducing emissions. [Green Alliance analysis](#) finds that reducing traffic will help secure reductions in emissions if the uptake of zero emission vehicles does not happen fast enough. Fewer cars and more buses on our roads will reduce congestion, which in turn improves air quality.

What are the key opportunities and challenges for Sheffield?

- Zero emission buses joined [Sheffield's fleet for the first time in 2023](#). Four battery-electric buses were rolled-out, publicly owned by the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authorities and part-funded by the government's [Zero-Emission Regional Bus Areas \(ZEBRA\) scheme](#).
- Appropriate funding acts as a barrier to the roll-out of ZEBs in Sheffield. In July 2023, Mayor [Oliver Coppard criticised](#) the government's 'London style transport system' following the announcement that South Yorkshire would receive just 15% public transport funding compared to other areas of the country. South Yorkshire received £4.50 per head for public transport spending compared to £33 per head for Greater Manchester.
- South Yorkshire is [currently assessing](#) the case for bus franchising in the combined authority region.

What do voters think?

- Polling undertaken by Stagecoach found [66% of the public think that the move to ZEBs is a good thing](#). But the transition depends on whether the public have a more positive impression of their local bus operator, there is a likely 268% increase in satisfaction amongst non-bus users after the introducing of ZEBs.
- Polling by Go-Ahead found [55% of respondents would be more likely to travel by bus if they knew it was a zero emission bus](#). When asked what would encourage them to travel by bus more often 56% chose cheaper tickets and 34% said speedier journeys.
- Polling undertaken by Global Action Plan found [82% of people think that air pollution should be a priority for the UK](#).

Suggested interventions

- How many zero emission buses have been allocated Zero Emission Bus Regional funding and how many are on the road as of today?
- When will government publish its response to the consultation on ending the sale of new non-zero emission buses, coaches and minibuses, which concluded in May 2022?
- How can Sheffield take learnings from other regions to continue to make progress on rolling out ZEBs?