

What councillors can do to expand free public transport

A guide for local government

Prior to the elections on 7 May, 211 councillors and candidates signed [a pledge](#) “to use our platforms to call for the extension of free public transport, which addresses social injustice, and can help tackle climate change and air pollution”. The pledge acknowledged that “funding models would have to change, in line with a public service approach” and the signatories committed to “exploring how this can be done, including learning from international models”.

Here are suggestions from from [Fare Free Greater Manchester](#), [Fare Free London](#), Fare Free Yorkshire and Better Buses West Yorkshire, about what to do next.

1. Promote the principle

- At every opportunity, **put [the case](#) for universal free public transport** – a policy that would require big changes at national government level.
- **Discuss incremental steps** towards this at local and regional level.
- **Point to international examples.** Some of the largest free transport projects are in places economically and socially dissimilar from the UK (e.g. 130 municipalities in [Brazil](#)) – but the experience of some cities in Europe with free public transport, e.g. [Montpellier \(France\)](#) is directly relevant.

2. Make free public transport part of response to fuel price crisis

- The war in the Gulf is [expected](#) to push prices up sharply. UK petrol prices rose by 10% in March. Free public transport addresses this new cost-of-living crisis in a socially equitable way. UK politicians have called for [free transport for under-22s](#) and [fare reductions](#) – but there is a strong case for [going further](#). In south Asia, where the fuel price shock has been more immediate, local authorities from [Punjab \(Pakistan\)](#) to [Victoria and Tasmania \(Australia\)](#) have introduced free public transport.

3. Expand free travel, as a step towards universal free travel

- Without a change of national government policy, local authorities may not have sufficient spending power to introduce universal free public transport. But they can introduce **free transport for groups of people** (e.g. Barnsley’s successful [free bus travel scheme for under-18s](#), financed by the [metropolitan borough council](#) and the South Yorkshire Mayoral [Combined Authority](#)). Other options include: free bus routes (e.g. those in [Wakefield](#) and [Manchester](#)); removal of time restrictions on existing free passes; and running free hopper buses.

4. Commission research on free transport’s potential, and run trials

- Free public transport works best as one element of an integrated transport policy that meets social and environmental goals. While the general principle applies everywhere, its application will differ from place to place, and this needs to be

carefully researched. An example to look at is [research](#) published by Glasgow City Council in 2024, which was followed by a [pilot scheme](#) conducted in early 2026.

5. Consider setting up a Local Authority Bus Company

- **Local authorities can again set up their own Local Authority Bus Companies (LABCos):** a ban on them doing so, imposed by the Tories in 1985, was repealed by the Bus Services Act 2025. This is a potential route towards cheap or free services, since the company's finances and spending priorities are in local authority hands.
- **Look at existing LABCos.** The government's [policy document](#) on implementing the Act says that guidance on setting up LABCos will be published in 2026. But, without waiting for that, local authorities can consider such examples as [Lothian Buses](#) and [Reading Buses](#).
- **In London,** Mayor Sadiq Khan [promised](#) in 2024 to consider setting up a LABCo when the law changed. **This is the time to do it.** London Assembly members and borough councillors can urge him to go ahead.
- The Bus Services Act also provides for [Enhanced Partnerships](#) (e.g. Nottingham City Transport's [partnerships](#) with Robin Hood Network and Leicestershire buses).
- [Franchising](#), such as the arrangements in London and Manchester, is an important step towards public ownership and control.

6. Stay in touch

- There are "Fare Free" regional campaigns that you can contact in **Manchester** (email@farefreegm.uk), **Yorkshire** (betterbuseswestyorkshire@gmail.com) and **London** (info@farefreelondon.org). In other areas, where there is no regional campaign yet, Fare Free London (info@farefreelondon.org) will try to put you in touch with others locally. The [Transport Action Network](#) can provide more detailed advice on transport policy issues.
- Join [our \(London/national\) whatsapp channel](#) or, if you are in the **borough of Haringey**, [our local group's whatsapp channel](#) (no spam, news and campaign updates only).

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