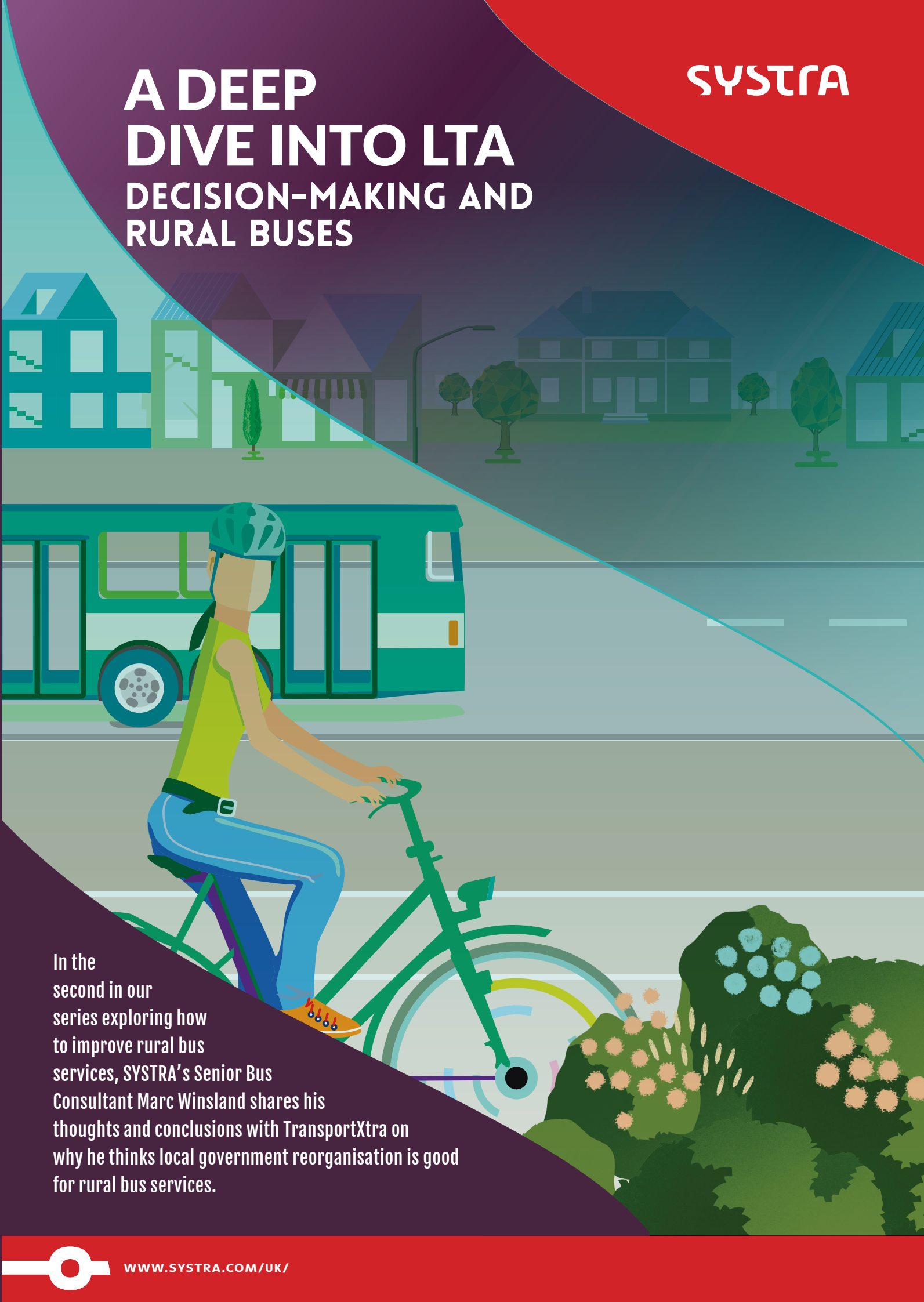


# A DEEP DIVE INTO LTA DECISION-MAKING AND RURAL BUSES

An illustration of a cyclist wearing a blue helmet, a yellow tank top, and blue trousers, riding a green bicycle on a road. In the background, a green bus is parked on the side of the road. The scene is set in a rural area with houses, trees, and a street lamp. The background is divided into a dark purple upper section and a light blue lower section by a diagonal line.

In the second in our series exploring how to improve rural bus services, SYSTRA's Senior Bus Consultant Marc Winsland shares his thoughts and conclusions with TransportXtra on why he thinks local government reorganisation is good for rural bus services.

# A DEEP DIVE INTO LTA DECISION-MAKING AND RURAL BUSES

**It's important to set boundaries. As human beings, we like things to be structured in a way that makes it easier for us to understand and deal with them. We apply this logic to everything from our personal relationships to the organisation of nation states. Lines on a map, therefore, govern every area of policy in the UK – from highly sensitive matters reserved to the nucleus of Downing Street down to the landscape of devolved decision-making at town halls, big and small, across these islands.**



In England, responsibility for bus services is exercised by no fewer than 76 local transport authorities. At one end of the scale is Transport for London, (serving London's population of eight million); at the other, there's Rutland County Council (which is home to roughly 40,000 people). A huge range, but that's not a bad thing, however, in such a big country (in terms of population, at least) as one size, famously, does not fit all.

Public transport is likewise dealt with differently by devolved Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In Scotland, it's nominally a matter for local councils, albeit with a layer of regional transport 'partnerships' (with varying levels of activity) sitting between them and a national agency; by far the biggest and most dynamic of the regional bodies is the Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT), which comprises a dozen councils and half of Scotland's population, anchored by (though not solely focused on) Greater Glasgow. In Wales, the Senedd recently voted to advance plans for re-regulation under the auspices of a national franchise. And, in Northern Ireland, with Translink, there is a longstanding system of publicly owned and operated buses and trains.

The patchwork quilt in England is ever-changing, too. The number of authorities has gradually chopped and changed over the years, as some such as Cumbria and Northamptonshire have been split into separate unitary authorities, or others such as Bournemouth and Poole have merged. Perhaps the biggest change to English local government in the last 50 years, of course, has been the introduction of Combined Authorities. Beginning with major metropolitan areas like Greater Manchester and West Yorkshire, they have strategic remits over transport planning and economic development - thus consolidating certain powers above the level of councils, while bringing others closer to the ground from the lofty corridors of Whitehall.

More than a decade later, nearly two-thirds of England's population live in an area covered by a devolution deal of some shape or form - with a pipeline of advanced negotiations and early proposals set to raise that fraction to three-quarters by this time next year. Crucially, this isn't an urban vs rural matter. Quite the opposite in fact: although the creation of Combined Authorities began in the big metros, it's forged ahead in many non-metropolitan areas as well, ranging from the East Midlands to Devon. This isn't a partisan agenda either, as Keir Starmer's Government has enthusiastically embraced the need to reform local government and sees the continuing roll-out of Combined Authorities as important.

On one hand, the Government's aim - spearheaded by Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner - is to radically simplify England's famously complex tangle of two-tier districts and counties by merging them into a fresh tranche of unitary authorities with populations of at least half a million. On the other hand, it actually wants to retain the two-tier feature, but with reinvigorated purpose. This new generation of Combined Authorities is expected to eventually adopt the Mayoral model, although some, such as Lancashire and the so-called 'Heart of Wessex', will initially skip that step to get things off the ground and then hash out the finer details later.

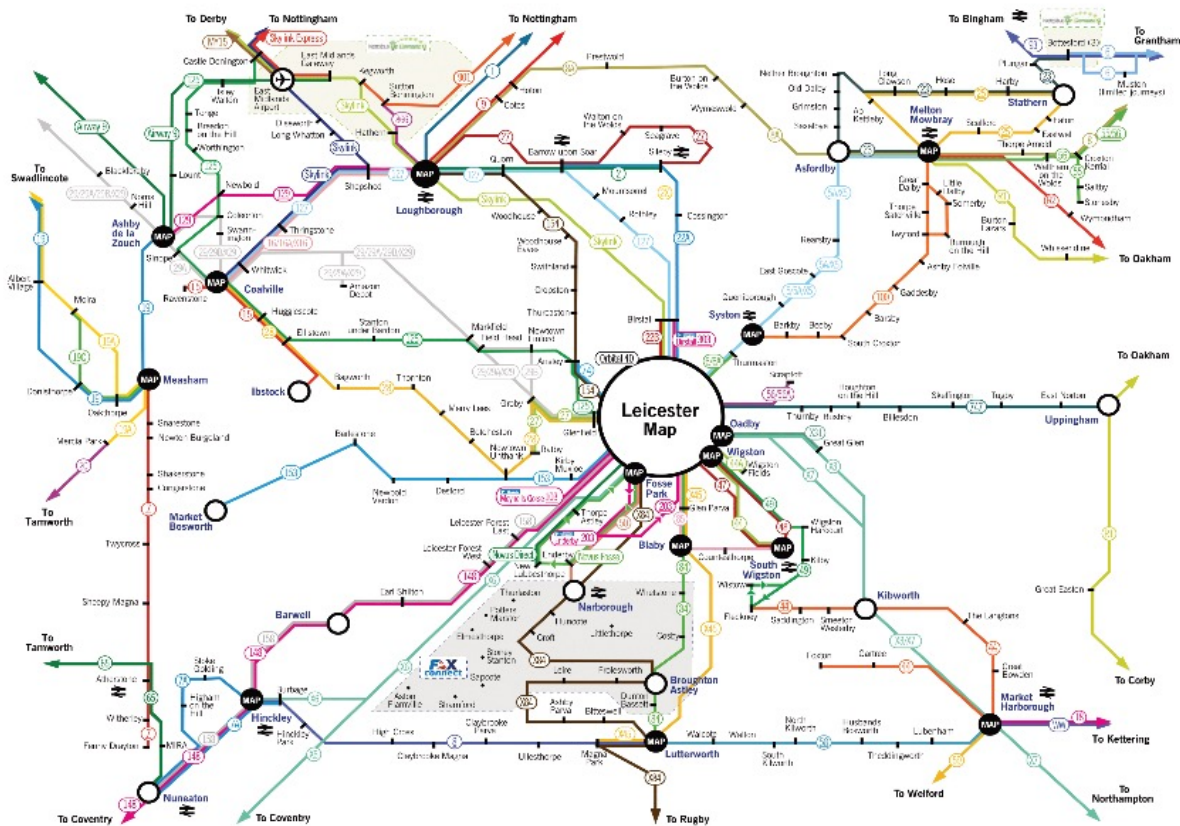
## So, what's all this got to do with rural bus services?



Well, just as the suburbs have enjoyed the advantages of greater integration with their urban centres, so too will rural residents benefit from counties 'reuniting' with their largest towns and cities - even if it's only for certain functions. Take Hampshire for example, where a new Combined Authority is scheduled to happen, subject to Parliamentary approval, in May 2026: day-to-day matters such as education and bin collections will remain under the control of the four local councils, whereas bus and train services will be one of the 'bigger ticket' items to be tackled on a regional basis. This is a best-of-both-worlds approach because it enables cross-boundary collaboration where it's most needed without the emotionally-charged risk that some areas will be scrubbed off the map altogether. After all, reforms to local government are often sensitive matters, with people feeling proud of their patch and territorial about its existence.

The nature of rural bus services is such that they are often geared, hub-and-spoke style, around major towns and cities. The reasons for this are threefold: because the regional economy encourages commuter flows into the nearest urban centre since hospitals, schools and shops are concentrated there, and they are the most suitable place for transfers between routes or modes. After all, major towns and cities exist precisely because of the historic convergence of people, products and services.

IT'S NO ACCIDENT THAT LEICESTERSHIRE'S RURAL BUS NETWORK RADIATES TO AND FROM THE CITY



Top of the wish list for the bus industry is for 'joined-up thinking'. When a bus route crosses an invisible line and the funding that supports it and the governance that regulates it stops at the same line, we have a problem. Not an insurmountable one, per se, but a problem, nonetheless. For example, a recent bus network review by SYSTRA on behalf of a unitary authority, found that most of the routes that required evaluation strayed far beyond the confines of the borough. As a result our recommendations were limited to the jurisdiction inside their control. Taking the perspective of the Combined Authority which the borough is about to join, a much smaller share of the network would have fallen out of scope, and the recommendations may have been more comprehensive.



## Setting boundaries

As we know, setting boundaries is important and lines must be drawn somewhere. But when it comes to public transport - the very essence of which is taking people beyond their doorstep - those lines shouldn't be a constriction.

One of the biggest obstacles rural bus operators and rural authorities face is making the numbers stack up, since the longer distances involved mean higher running costs and lower patronage raises less revenue. Such is the challenge of serving big areas with small, sparse populations. Rural bus services have declined by over 25% since 2010 due to a combination of austerity, rising costs, and declining demand. Subsidy reliance is common but shrinking budgets and tendering inefficiencies leave gaps in services, accelerating the cycle of decline.

This issue is exacerbated by the way the Department for Transport allocates funding. Of the £2.2bn for supporting bus services across England in FY2022/23, the per capita spend was £105.80 in London; £35.91 in metropolitan areas; and £17.73 in non-metropolitan areas. That's a postcode lottery if ever there was one.

Cue regional strategic planning. It would serve to pool resources, redistribute funding, and share knowledge and skills - achieving economies of scale which make it infinitely easier to implement reforms such as franchising (thanks to more competitive procurement), or more robust Enhanced Partnerships (thanks to unified service design). Referring back to SPT in Scotland, its territory runs the gamut from Scotland's biggest, busiest city to the Island of Arran served by three bus routes and a ferry. Combining efforts makes the whole region stronger and more prosperous than its 12 constituent councils would be on their own.

The drive for better buses, plus the mission for a 'devolution revolution', presents a well-timed opportunity across England. The map below captures the state of play as Combined Authorities race to become the new normal.

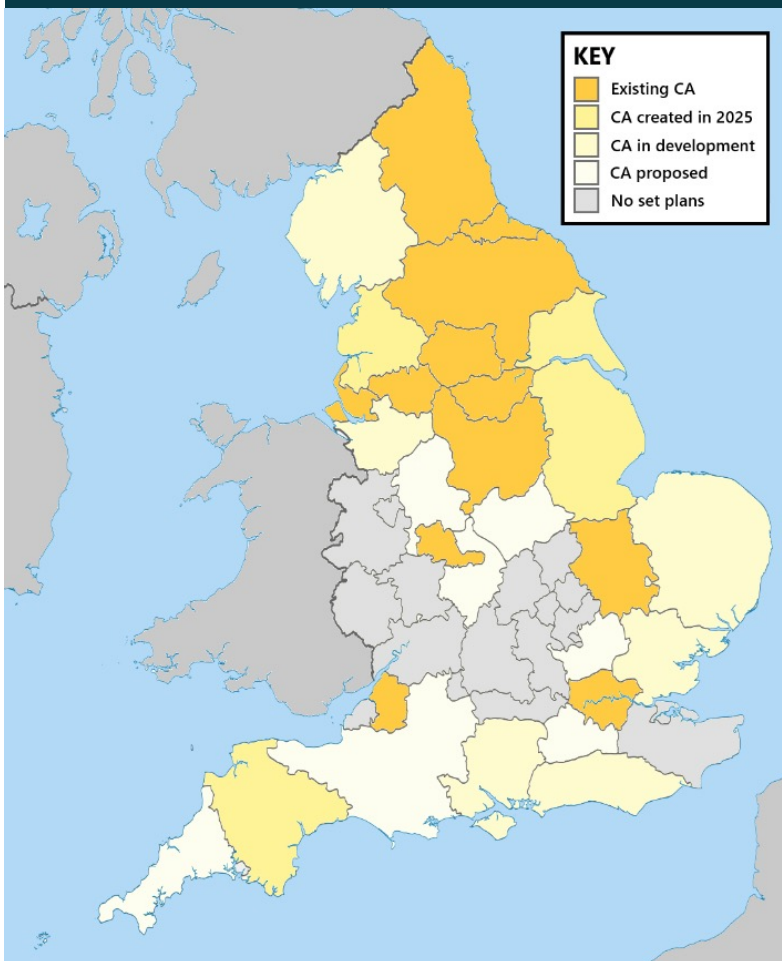




## Public transport crosses boundaries

That's one of its many jobs. Looking at the prospect of further devolution through a rural lens, it makes a lot of sense for more authorities responsible for public transport to do so. We are already seeing the green shoots of success from authorities that have been devolved such as West Yorkshire and the North East. Whether it's integrated ticketing, co-ordinated schedules or spending taxpayers' money more equitably across larger areas, there is a symbiotic relationship between rural services and urban networks. It's not just rural areas that would enjoy the benefits of collaboration: if bus links to outlying towns and villages were to disappear today, cities would suffer tomorrow.

LINKING UP IS CRITICAL TO LEVELLING UP



Marc Winsland and the SYSTRA Bus Team will be sharing their expertise, analysis, and insight on delivering better bus services across the UK in upcoming editions of TransportXtra. You can explore more of their work here: <https://www.systra.com/uk/markets/transport/bus/A> deep dive into Enhanced Partnerships and franchising



Local Authority devolution makes a lot of sense for authorities responsible for public transport

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