

Rt Hon Andy Burnham MP

Prime Minister
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Via Email: andy.burnham.mp@parliament.uk

Shropshire Council
The Guildhall
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Date: 20/07/2026

Dear Prime Minister

Re: The Growing Impact of Rural Funding Inequality on Bus Services in Shropshire

Congratulations on your appointment by His Majesty the King as the United Kingdom's new Prime Minister.

We were struck by your speech on Friday when you became Leader of your party, and your message of hope. You quite rightly identified that *"If local places don't control something as basic as a bus service, how can they connect people to opportunity and turn things around?"*, and in addition that *"Four decades of the neoliberalism that began in the 1980s, have not been kind to the places that built our party, nor to the communities across the UK in rural and coastal areas. So we pledge today to them to be better."*

Under Conservative Governments and Council Administrations, between 2015 and 2023, the number of miles you can travel in Shropshire by bus fell by the largest amount in England, with a 63% decrease in bus miles over the period. This has structural impacts on economic growth, access to education, work and health services.

We are writing to highlight the very real consequences that the continuing reduction in revenue funding from the Governments led by your predecessors, both Conservative and more recently Labour, is having on public transport provision in Shropshire and to seek your support for a fairer funding settlement that properly recognises the challenges of delivering essential services across large rural counties. We ask you to *"be better"*.

Shropshire Council has recently completed a comprehensive review of 21 supported bus services as part of our 2026 retendering programme. While the review has secured several positive improvements, it has also required a number of difficult decisions driven not by policy preference, but by financial necessity. The review was undertaken against a backdrop of reduced Government revenue support for local bus services and rising operating costs across the transport sector. To maintain those 21 services in their existing

form would have required the Council to identify an additional £1.25 million of funding each year for services which currently cost £3m.

Despite these pressures, we have worked hard to protect the routes that matter most. Key inter-urban services linking market towns have been retained, including the Market Drayton to Shrewsbury service, which is now being protected through direct council funding. We are also introducing improvements such as a new Ellesmere-Wem service (two towns which have not been connected for decades, importantly connecting Ellesmere to the train station in Wem), investment in more accessible vehicles, enhanced timetables, extended evening Park and Ride operations in Shrewsbury, and upgraded passenger information infrastructure. The evening Park and Ride service builds on the success of the Shrewsbury Night Bus trial championed by Julia Buckley MP which you yourself saw in action earlier this year.

However, these improvements have only been achievable through a careful reprioritisation of scarce resources. This has included reducing the number of Park and Ride sites in Shrewsbury, withdrawing low-use services, and focusing investment on routes that provide the greatest social and economic benefit. These are difficult choices for a rural authority where public transport is often not simply a convenience but a lifeline to employment, education, healthcare and social connection.

These pressures are directly impacting our ability to deliver against the ambitions set out in our Bus Service Improvement Plan. Our vision is to create a modern, accessible, reliable and integrated public transport network that supports economic growth, reduces isolation, improves access to opportunity and contributes to environmental sustainability. The plan aligns closely with the objectives within the Local Outcomes Framework, particularly those focused on improving health and wellbeing, strengthening communities, supporting economic prosperity, reducing inequality, and enabling residents to access employment, education and essential services.

The ambition is there. The strategy is there. The local commitment is there.

What is increasingly absent is the revenue funding needed to turn that ambition into reality.

Without a fairer approach to rural funding, councils such as Shropshire will increasingly be forced into choosing between protecting existing lifeline services and investing in the improvements that Government rightly wants to see delivered. This is not a sustainable position for communities, businesses or local economies.

Whilst we recognise that Combined Mayoral Authorities are the preferred channel for increased funding, it remains that our geography makes this challenging, as highlighted by the initial work on Spatial Development Strategies.

We therefore urge your Government to review the distribution of local bus revenue support to ensure that rural counties are treated fairly and that funding formulae properly recognise the additional costs of serving dispersed populations. If rural authorities are to deliver on the national objectives of economic growth, social mobility, environmental sustainability and integrated transport, they must be provided with the resources necessary to do so.

Shropshire stands ready to work constructively with your Government to deliver better outcomes for residents. We simply ask for the funding framework that allows us to match our ambition with delivery.

Yours sincerely

Handwritten signature of Heather Kidd in black ink.

Councillor Heather Kidd
Leader of Shropshire Council
Shropshire Council

Handwritten signature of Rob Wilson in black ink.

Councillor Rob Wilson
Portfolio Holder for Transport and Regeneration
Shropshire Council

Cc: Secretary of State for Transport, Stuart Anderson MP (South Shropshire), Julia Buckley MP (Shrewsbury), Helen Morgan MP (North Shropshire), Mark Pritchard MP (Wrekin).