

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee  
Wednesday 24 September 2025  
14th Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

## PE2116: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers

### Introduction

**Petitioner** Ellie Harrison on behalf of Better Buses for Strathclyde

**Petition summary** Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to improve the process for implementing the bus franchising powers contained in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 by:

- introducing, without delay, the regulations and statutory guidance required to give bus franchising powers full effect
- amending the 2019 Act to remove the requirement for proposed franchising frameworks to be approved by a panel appointed by the traffic commissioner, instead empowering Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs) to have the final say on approving proposals
- providing additional funding to help support RTPs in preparing franchising frameworks and assisting them with initial set-up costs once frameworks are approved.

**Webpage** <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2116>

1. [The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on 27 November 2024.](#) At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the seven statutory Regional Transport Partnerships, Confederation of Passenger Transport, Bus Users Scotland, the Traffic Commissioner for Scotland, the Bee Network in Greater Manchester, the West Yorkshire Combined Authority, Transport for Wales, UK Ministers, the Law Society of Scotland, and key bus operators in Scotland.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received new written submissions from the Law Society of Scotland, Tactran, Office of the Traffic Commissioner, SEStran, SWestrans, SPT, Confederation of Passenger Transport Scotland, Nestrans, Bus Users UK, UK Department for Transport, West Yorkshire Combined Authority, Lothian Buses, HITRANS and the petitioner, which are set out in **Annexe C**.
4. The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity has written to the Convener of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee on 25 June setting out the status of draft statutory guidance and the Government's position to not modify the current franchising process. The letter has been included at **Annexe D**.

5. [Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the petition's webpage.](#)
6. [Further background information about this petition can be found in the SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
7. [The Scottish Government gave its initial response to the petition on 10 September 2024.](#)
8. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 4,300 signatures have been received on this petition.

## **Action**

9. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

**Clerks to the Committee**  
**September 2025**

## Annexe A: Summary of petition

### PE2116: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers

#### Petitioner

Ellie Harrison on behalf of Better Buses for Strathclyde

#### Date Lodged

15 August 2024

#### Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to improve the process for implementing the bus franchising powers contained in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 by:

- introducing, without delay, the regulations and statutory guidance required to give bus franchising powers full effect
- amending the 2019 Act to remove the requirement for proposed franchising frameworks to be approved by a panel appointed by the traffic commissioner, instead empowering Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs) to have the final say on approving proposals
- providing additional funding to help support RTPs in preparing franchising frameworks and assisting them with initial set-up costs once frameworks are approved.

#### Background information

There is widespread consensus across the UK that the policy of bus deregulation (implemented in 1986) has failed to deliver the integrated and affordable public transport urgently required to meet climate targets and reduce inequalities.

[The new UK Government has announced plans for a Better Buses Bill, to “support every community \[in England\] to take back control of buses through franchising or public ownership”.](#)

Due to severe delays enacting the franchising powers in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, Transport Scotland’s failure to support RTPs to use these powers, as well as cuts to RTPs budgets, Scotland now lags far behind England and [Wales in the process of re-regulation](#).

We believe the requirement of an independent panel to approve proposals in Scotland is an unnecessary step, which risks wasting many more years and approx. £15million per RTP, if proposals are rejected. The legislation must be simplified to give the democratically-accountable RTP Boards the final say.

## **Annexe B: Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE2116 on 27 November 2024**

**The Convener:** Our next petition is PE2116, lodged by Ellie Harrison on behalf of Better Buses for Strathclyde, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to improve the process for implementing the bus franchising powers that are contained in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 by introducing, without delay, the regulations and statutory guidance that are required to give bus franchising powers full effect; amending the 2019 act to remove the requirement for proposed franchising frameworks to be approved by a panel appointed by the traffic commissioner, and instead empowering regional transport partnerships to have the final say on approving proposals; and providing additional funding to help support regional transport partnerships in preparing franchising frameworks and assisting them with the initial set-up costs once frameworks are approved.

We have assembled a galaxy of parliamentary talent this morning. I welcome to the meeting Neil Bibby, Patrick Harvie, Mark Ruskell, Graham Simpson and Paul Sweeney. We had also hoped to have Katy Clark with us, but unfortunately she is unable to attend.

For some of you—I am looking at Mr Sweeney—it is a return to familiar territory. I think that we have also had Mr Ruskell at the committee before, but it is Mr Harvie's first appearance—during my tenure, at any rate.

**Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** Yes, during your tenure, convener.

**The Convener:** I welcome you all.

Members will be aware that, although section 38 of the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, which makes provisions for local bus service franchising, came into effect in December 2023, the full suite of secondary legislation and guidance for the introduction of local service franchising is not yet in place. Transport Scotland, in its initial response to the petition, indicates that a number of substantive regulations have been laid, stating that

“The remaining regulations and statutory guidance to bring the franchising provisions into effect will be provided before the end of this year.”

The initial response also states that the Scottish Government has no plans to revisit the primary legislation to remove the requirement for an independent panel to be convened to approve or reject a local transport authority's franchising proposal.

As has been highlighted in the submissions that we have received from the petitioner, although the delay in enacting provisions is, in their view, “inexcusable”, events have now slightly overtaken us. As members will likely be aware, the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, at its meeting on 29 October, considered a Scottish statutory instrument relating to the traffic commissioner's role in appointing the independent panel and recommended that the SSI be annulled. A motion to annul the SSI was subsequently lodged in the chamber, and was not agreed to. That means that the regulations are in place, and, indeed, they came into effect on 1 November.

During the NZET Committee's consideration of the recent SSI, it has become apparent that the remaining regulations and associated guidance will now be published in the new year. There is a lot of information to consider, which is detailed in our papers for today's meeting, and it includes developments relating to bus franchising in other parts of the UK. We have also received a written submission from Paul Sweeney, which is included in our papers, too.

I invite all colleagues who have expressed an interest in the matter—as I welcome the interest of parliamentary colleagues in relation to petitions—to address the committee. We thought of having an opinion poll to see in which order we should hear from you all, but, ultimately, we opted simply to invite you to speak in alphabetical order. I know that the clerks have asked you, if you can, to complement, rather than repeat, one another's evidence. The committee would very much appreciate that.

We will begin with Neil Bibby.

**Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** Good morning, convener. I understand that you want us to be brief—and I will happily be brief.

Although I am delighted to be at the committee, I am, to be frank, fed up with talking about this particular issue. However, I am not nearly as fed up as my constituents in West Scotland are about being failed by an utterly broken bus market.

I commend Ellie Harrison and the Better Buses for Strathclyde campaign for lodging the petition. As members will know, I represent the West Scotland region, including Renfrewshire, which last year saw a 13 per cent cut in bus services. That drastic cut that has had real consequences for people in West Scotland. Young people in Erskine are struggling to get to college; disabled residents in Gallowhill are being abandoned; there are veterans in Erskine without a nearby bus stop; national health service workers from Barrhead and Neilston are facing challenges in making it to their shifts at the Royal Alexandra hospital; and working mothers in Johnstone are finding it impossible to drop their kids off at school and get to work on time. In Foxbar, a dialysis patient is now having to make a daily taxi journey, because of early morning bus cuts. All the while, people in Glasgow and the west are paying among the highest bus fares anywhere in the UK.

Frankly, people have had enough, which is why you have so many MSPs in front of you this morning. Young people and older people alike are now asking what the point of a free bus pass is if there is no bus to get on. I focused on Renfrewshire, because I can offer that particular perspective, but the same stories are being replicated across Glasgow and the west.

Private bus operators clearly want to keep the status quo, but that is not an option; reform is long overdue and needs to be accelerated in the ways that the petitioner has put forward. Bus passengers in the west need and deserve change. The same franchising powers have been implemented in places such as Manchester, Liverpool and Leeds—and if it is good enough for those areas, it is certainly good enough for Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

The process for putting local buses under local control should be accelerated, and transport authorities should be provided with the necessary resources and information to make that happen urgently. I welcome the petition.

**The Convener:** Thank you, Mr Bibby. You have illustrated your evidence with examples from communities adjacent to my constituency in Eastwood, where there are similar concerns. Given that I regularly—indeed, almost daily—receive representations on the inadequacy of bus services, particularly in what is a growing community that feels that it is not at all well served by those services, I understand the points that you have made.

I invite Patrick Harvie to contribute.

**Patrick Harvie:** Thank you, convener. I am grateful to you and the committee for making time for so many colleagues to address you. The fact that so many of us are here should be the first demonstration to you of the clear breadth of political support for greater urgency in this area.

I have seen very positive engagement by the campaigners—certainly those based in Glasgow, who are working with all political parties that represent the city. There is clear consensus that there needs to be fundamental change. In fact, the passing of the 2019 act demonstrates that there is already clear consensus on the need to move in the direction of franchising and to support local areas that choose to do so. The passing of the 2019 act was intended not only to make that possible but to make significant progress in that direction.

Even when the Parliament was considering that legislation, the committee that was doing so took a litany of evidence at stage 1 that the process, including the panel, would simply take too long. Many organisations—the Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland, Glasgow City Council, the Strathclyde Partnership for Transport, the Scottish Association for Public Transport and the Urban Transport Group—raised concerns about the timescale involved and the level of bureaucracy and lack of democratic accountability in that process.

Since the bill went through the Parliament and became an act, faster progress has been made elsewhere than is being made in Scotland, despite the political consensus that this should be the direction of travel. It is very clear that, if we are going to see communities such as the one that Neil Bibby described and, indeed, right across Scotland benefit from the required change, we need to accelerate the process. If that means the Scottish Government making relatively minor changes to primary legislation, that is what should happen.

**Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green):** I am a member of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee that recently scrutinised the regulations that were approved—if very narrowly—by the Parliament.

It is important that bus services, which are public services, are run in the public interest. Franchising is an important part of the public control that is needed, and that is reflected in the 2019 act. As Patrick Harvie has said, the issue is that, in the years since the act was passed, franchising has progressed very rapidly in England, while we have yet to see that kind of progress in Scotland.

Some of the reasons for that are down to the fact that we have not had the legislation in place to enable us to proceed. However, the petitioners also have concerns about whether the decision-making process for a franchise for bus services could be influenced by vested interests.

At the moment, the process that was agreed by the Parliament focuses on the role of the traffic commissioner, who is appointed by the UK Government, not by the Scottish Government. It is the traffic commissioner who appoints the panel that ultimately makes the decision. That is a problem, because one of the traffic commissioner's stated objectives is to minimise the regulatory burden on operators. If operators who are actively frustrating bus franchising go to court to challenge the bus franchising process, their interests could effectively be represented in a roundabout way through a decision-making panel. That would put the panel in direct opposition to what the 2019 act was trying to achieve, which is to encourage more public control through franchising.

The initial consultation on the act indicated that ministers would make the decisions on franchising, but now, it is the traffic commissioner and a panel that will do that. That requires more examination. The NZET committee has yet to approve the final piece of legislation in the jigsaw that would allow franchising to go forward. This committee could look at the issue again, take evidence from the petitioners and look critically at the issue of a potential conflict of interest between the traffic commissioner and the panel.

11:15

**Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** This is also my first time at the committee, and it has been fascinating and entertaining. I must come back.

Others have laid out the case for franchising. As you know, convener, too many areas of Scotland are not well served by buses. I describe some of those areas as bus deserts. I live in a place where the bus service is not good enough, and it leads to many people using their cars, because they do not have a choice. Franchising, if implemented, has the potential to provide a solution, but the frustration that colleagues have already expressed is that, in Scotland, it is taking far too long. I think that that is where the petitioners are coming from, too.

I invite the committee to look at the process. It might also wish to look at some of the suggested legislation from the new UK Government. There is the proposed buses bill, which will speed up the process of franchising down south. I think that we need something similar in Scotland, because of the frustration that things are taking far too long. Mr Ruskell mentioned, quite rightly, the Parliament's recent tied vote on bus franchising, in which the final vote went to the Presiding Officer. The concern in that respect related to the undemocratic nature of the panel, which could quash any work that had already been done on franchising.

The only game in town at the moment is the Strathclyde Partnership for Transport, which covers the convener's constituency and is looking at franchising. If it did go down that road, it would spend a lot of time and money only to, ultimately, come up against a three-person panel that could stop it from going ahead. I do not think that that is a very good system at all.

**The Convener:** I call Paul Sweeney to speak on his written submission.

**Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab):** Thank you, convener. I appreciate your kindness in allowing me to speak in addition to my written submission.

In addition to what colleagues have already outlined in relation to the dysfunctional nature of the bus network in the west of Scotland and greater Glasgow area, I highlight that the control of the fare box is a critical factor in a franchising structure. It is not about nationalising the assets of bus companies—going down that route would be a red herring. It is about centralising and having public control of the fare box, which would allow for rational, coherent management of an integrated bus system and enable its integration with other transport modes, such as rail, subway and so on.

The concern relates to the lack of progress with the implementation of the provisions in the 2019 act. We feel that it is bizarre that UK legislation within a similar timescale has been implemented but implementation has not happened nearly as quickly in Scotland. One could surmise that it might be that the Government was reluctant in the first place to entertain the amendments to the 2019 act, which introduced provisions for franchising and that, therefore, it was not as eager to enact the provisions. However, we are where we are.

There is contention over the act's provision on the traffic commissioner's panel having veto power over democratic decisions made by regional transport authorities on the implementation of their preferred structures. Therefore, I wonder whether the committee could take further evidence from, say, the Law Society of Scotland on the differences between the UK and Scottish legislation and what can be done to improve it. It could also ask for evidence from SPT and, indeed, seek evidence from the Better Buses for Strathclyde campaign, which initiated the petition, about the nature of its concerns with regard to the legislation. After all, it has studied it in great detail and understands the issues with it in great depth.

The committee could also consider inviting the Secretary of State for Transport and, perhaps, the UK Minister for Buses—Louise Haigh and Simon Lightwood—to offer their views on the appointment of a new traffic commissioner for Scotland. That role is currently vacant; it was advertised earlier in the year, but the appointment process was disrupted by the general election. Given their policy position, it might be interesting to get their perspectives with regard to their support for franchising in Scotland and how they might be able to assist colleagues in Scotland with its implementation, through the appointment of a bus traffic commissioner who would be minded to support such measures.

**The Convener:** Thank you. A number of suggestions have been made that I think that we might want to pursue, and I would note those made by Mr Sweeney and Mr Simpson, particularly in relation to legislation and other such matters. Do colleagues have any suggestions for action?

**David Torrance:** I was considering suggesting that the petition be referred to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, but, gentlemen, you have been so convincing that I would like the committee to continue with the petition. Can we write to the seven statutory regional transport partnerships, seeking their views on the ask in the petition? I wonder whether we should also consider writing to the



Confederation of Passenger Transport, Bus Users Scotland and the traffic commissioner for Scotland. I would also like the committee to write to the Bee Network in Greater Manchester, the West Yorkshire Combined Authority and Transport for Wales, seeking information on their experience of developing and introducing bus franchising in their areas.

**The Convener:** Perhaps we could also ask SPICe to have a look at the proposed better buses bill at Westminster and to give us a little bit of information on that.

Do you want to comment, Mr Ewing?

**Fergus Ewing:** Yes. I am not familiar with the circumstances in the central belt of Scotland, but certainly in the north of Scotland, many rural communities have no bus services whatsoever. With the bus services in Inverness, which are provided by Stagecoach, the problem has not been one of regulation or otherwise; it has been a lack of drivers. Indeed, it is a very serious problem. The very detailed exchange that my constituency office has had with Stagecoach indicates that it has gone to great lengths to sort the problem, and it has recruited more drivers. I thought that I would make that point, convener, because I am genuinely unfamiliar with the issues that the members have raised, and I defer to their experience.

**The Convener:** Is that a potential future career option for you, Mr Ewing?

**Fergus Ewing:** I suspect not—actually, definitely not.

I suggest, just for the sake of balance, that we ask the key operators in the relevant areas for their views, because we on this committee have a duty to listen to all sides of the argument. I would be interested to know what the operators' view is, particularly with regard to the costs of franchising. I recall how, 20 years ago, when this issue was raised with the Local Government and Transport Committee, of which I was a member, we found cost to be a significant factor in the equation, because the costs of running a process are costs that could, some might argue, be better deployed in delivering a better transport system.

**The Convener:** I think that it is perfectly reasonable to invite others to contribute evidence to the committee, and I think that we are going to hold the petition open.

As a final thought, I might not usually do this but, if any of those who have addressed us this morning have any other suggestions of other things that they might like us to take evidence on, they should speak up quickly now. I am quite happy for them to do so. Mr Bibby?

**Neil Bibby:** I have nothing to add.

**The Convener:** So you are quite content. Mr Sweeney?

**Paul Sweeney:** I just want to emphasise the point about UK ministers having input to the committee—

**The Convener:** I heard you make that point, yes—it was not lost on me. As you know, the Parliament has been very successful at acquiring the contributions of UK ministers. [*Laughter.*] We can put in a long-term request and see what success we

have in due course; maybe something will be made available to us before Parliament dissolves.

I note that a number of supporters of the petition are in the gallery this morning—thank you for joining us. We will keep the petition open and advance the interests as has been suggested. As we move on to our next and final new petition this morning, I thank everyone very much for their participation.

## **Annexe C: Written submissions**

### **Law Society of Scotland written submission, 3 January 2025**

#### **PE2116/E: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers**

Thank you for your letter of 4 December 2024 regarding the above petition. You requested information on any work the Society has undertaken on the implementation of the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, specifically the powers related to bus franchising, and how the development and implementation of this legislation might differ from legislation being developed across the rest of the UK.

As far as I am aware, and having discussed with colleagues, the Society has not undertaken any work on the implementation of the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019. This includes the powers related to bus franchising.

I am also not aware of the Society having undertaken any work on how the development and implementation of the 2019 Act might differ from legislation being developed across the rest of the UK.

The Society did engage with the Transport (Scotland) Bill during parliamentary scrutiny. Details of our engagement can be found on our website: [Transport \(Scotland\) Bill | Law Society of Scotland](#).

I hope that the above information is helpful to the Committee. If we can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me.

### **Tactran written submission, 9 January 2025**

#### **PE2116/F: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers**

Thank you for inviting Tactran to provide our view in respect of petition PE2116 in relation to bus franchising powers.

Tactran is the Regional Transport Partnership (RTP) for Tayside and Central Scotland covering the Angus, Dundee, Perth & Kinross, and Stirling council areas. Tactran was established under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2005. Tactran is a model 1 RTP and is the statutory body responsible for developing, maintaining and overseeing the delivery of the Regional Transport Strategy (RTS). Tactran's most recent RTS was approved by Cabinet Secretary for Transport in April 2024 and adopted by the Tactran Partnership in June 2024.

The petition supports actions to accelerate implementation of bus franchising powers contained within the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 at section 38, themselves one of a series of 'new powers' contained from section 36 of the 2019 Act. In making this response we feel it appropriate to support the intention(s) of the new powers, as we understand them, on a global basis; namely, to create conditions for greater levels of bus use, as may include, but not be limited to: bus service improvement, greater reliability, improved availability, integration, and coordination. While both intent and effect might be accomplished by changes in the ownership and management structures of the bus companies themselves, including franchising, the extent to

which any one approach is appropriate will be largely dictated by the circumstances and local contexts of delivery.

Tactran have undertaken a series of analyses of the bus market within our area. The work stems from the RTS commitment to explore new models of bus supply and includes reviews of the implications of the 2019 Act, public satisfaction and behaviour analysis, the development of a pathfinder study, and of a bus plan focused on options for delivery. In each case it was recognised that practical delivery options differed between city, rural, and regional services. In short no one model would fully satisfy the needs nor result in comprehensive behaviour change where treated in isolation. Moreover, the coordination and development of partnerships was felt more likely to benefit urban areas than a franchise option, while Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) and more flexible transport options were highlighted as appropriate to local bus service provision in rural communities. While neither instance precludes greater authority involvement, with a number of options benefiting from the coordination and network effects of such involvement, these were felt possible in partnership models.

Separately the RTP supports the operation of two bus alliances, the Tayside Bus Alliance, and the Forth Valley Bus Alliance, the latter being managed by our neighbouring RTP SEStran. In each instance the intent to deliver service improvements is highlighted. The Tayside Bus alliance also focusing on integration of active and public transport options, including the identification of sustainable transport corridors in both Perth and Dundee. The alliances also supported the concept of improvement partnership(s), as a structural framework contained within the new powers, while application of these would need to be focused on the local authorities within the Tactran region, as it is the Local Authorities; Angus, Dundee City, Perth and Kinross and Stirling Councils, that are the transport authorities in each instance.

It is also appropriate to highlight the issues of funding, supporting infrastructure, and associated instruments, including ticketing. Experience in other areas of the UK, notably in the development of Bus Service Improvement plans in England, metropolitan area franchises, notably in England, and government direct control, as illustrated in Northern Ireland, reflect distinctly different contexts, and may thus not be fully comparable with the circumstances either in Scotland, in general, or Tactran specifically. Improvement plans in England appear to have been accompanied by significant additional specific support funding, which is not the case in Scotland. Similarly recent moves to franchise in metropolitan areas of England are also reflective of a distinct and supported metropolitan (regional) council, which is not the case in the Tactran area, and only partially visible in other areas. The role of sufficient and targeted funding cannot be underplayed, as success in regulatory reform follows primarily from an affordable improvement in services, in short, a regulatory change is constrained by the positive level of investment that supports it. It is further notable that integration appears constrained as may be affected by further aspects of the 2019 act specific to ticketing opportunity, and the nature of the regulatory model itself.

We therefore highlight that any development in terms of a regulatory structure, regardless as to which model is adopted, requires both contextual and circumstantial compatibility. This is not limited to the model alone, but necessarily requires funding

appropriate to need, policy integration, including across modes, and structural alignment.

I trust this response is helpful to the Committee. Should you have any further questions please contact me.

## **Office of the Traffic Commissioner written submission, 9 January 2025**

### **PE2116/G: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers**

Thank you for your email of 2 December 2024 requesting the Traffic Commissioner's views on the actions called for in the above-mentioned petition relating to the franchising of local bus services.

The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to improve the process for implementing the bus franchising powers contained in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 by:

- introducing, without delay, the regulations and statutory guidance required to give bus franchising powers full effect
- amending the 2019 Act to remove the requirement for proposed franchising frameworks to be approved by a panel appointed by the traffic commissioner, instead empowering Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs) to have the final say on approving proposals
- providing additional funding to help support RTPs in preparing franchising frameworks and assisting them with initial set-up costs once frameworks are approved.

As you may be aware the post of Traffic Commissioner for Scotland is currently vacant, and the functions are being covered by the Senior Traffic Commissioner in his capacity as Deputy Traffic Commissioner for Scotland.

The Senior Traffic Commissioner thanks the Committee for the opportunity to comment. As traffic commissioners are independent of Government and act in a judicial capacity, they do not normally comment on existing policy decisions taken on a political matter. It is anticipated that the options were fully considered as part of the policy development when the legislation was originally put before the Scottish Parliament.

The Senior Traffic Commissioner and his officials will, of course, continue to work with Scottish Government officials to implement any approved scheme.

## **SEStran written submission, 10 January 2025**

### **PE2116/H: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers**

Thank you for inviting us to respond to the petition led by Better Buses for Strathclyde.

The South East of Scotland Transport Partnership (SEStran) is the statutory Regional Transport Partnership for the South East of Scotland. SEStran encompasses eight local authorities: the City of Edinburgh, Clackmannanshire, East Lothian, Falkirk, Fife, Midlothian, Scottish Borders, and West Lothian.

### **SEStran Regional Bus Strategy**

At its meeting in June 2023, the SEStran Partnership Board agreed that SEStran would, in collaboration with our constituent local authorities, develop a Regional Bus Strategy (RBS).

In December 2023, funding was secured from the Transport Scotland Community Bus Fund to develop the RBS and, in February 2024, SYSTRA and Stantec were jointly awarded a contract to undertake this work.

In June 2024, the Case for Change (CfC) was approved by the Board. The Vision for the RBS, developed as part of the CfC is:

To provide a high quality, affordable, accessible and available bus network for the whole region. This will be fully integrated with other forms of transport, deliver increased passenger numbers and passenger satisfaction, to support the social, environmental and inclusive economic development of the region.

The key findings of the CfC are that:

- Some markets are not served at all, or are served poorly, either at all or at certain times of the day or week
- There is little true competition in terms of services and fares in many parts of the region and
- Delays and congestion are significantly impacting the attractiveness of the network and eroding passenger confidence and perceptions of travel by bus

For passengers, the current operating model means:

- Fares and ticketing can be complex and more expensive with limited convenient integration between operators and / or modes
- Most bus routes are run on a commercial basis meaning some areas are better served than others – but bus services can generate wider economic, social and environmental benefits which can mean that it is economically efficient to increase supply above the levels determined by the commercial market
- Customer standards and satisfaction varies vastly across the region given different service providers
- A loss in passenger confidence due to instability in the bus network (due to reduced services, high journey times, changes in routes, poor reliability etc.) is evident in places

- There is some competition between public transport and sustainable modes rather than integration of them

The current operating models across the SEStran region:

- Cannot provide a truly planned and integrated public transport network in terms of timetabled interchange and fares
- Cannot effectively and efficiently coordinate a long-term transport strategy that supports the RTS vision
- Means that there is limited control over the routes operated, service frequencies, fares charged, or tickets sold by operators
- Needs to provide increasing public sector funding to support socially necessary services to fill gaps in provision at a time when local authority funding is constrained and has been declining relatively over time

Draft policies, which we hope will shape our bus network and patronage for the future, are currently being developed. It is too early to state which, if any, powers of the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 will be required to achieve the vision. However, SEStran does recognise that the current model is not delivering sufficiently to move the dial away from the managed decline being evidenced across the country.

### **SEStran position on Better Buses for Strathclyde's petition**

We have considered each aspect of the petition in turn:

- **Introducing, without delay, the regulations and statutory guidance required to give bus franchising powers full effect**

We would welcome the publication of regulations and statutory guidance as soon as possible, as a full understanding of these will be key to finalising the RBS.

- **Amending the 2019 Act to remove the requirement for proposed franchising frameworks to be approved by a panel appointed by the traffic commissioner, instead empowering Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs) to have the final say on approving proposals**
  - The group of experts deciding on franchising must be fully informed, impartial and working in the interest of the public.
  - It is worth noting that all Regional Transport Partnerships are not created equally. SEStran does not directly manage public transport services in the way that our peers in Strathclyde Passenger Transport do. In the SEStran region, our local authorities work with private operators on subsidised routes or services, and would play key roles in any future franchising opportunities.
- **Providing additional funding to help support RTPs in preparing franchising frameworks and assisting them with initial set-up costs once frameworks are approved.**

- We welcome this request and would suggest it be extended to cover local authorities who may lead franchising efforts and, in any scenario, would be cornerstone partners in RTP franchising.

Beyond the specific asks of the petition, we would bring the Committee's attention to the significant reduction in bus funding over the last couple of years. Exploring and delivering on any powers of the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 needs to be supported by significant investment.

SEStran is aware of the current financial constraints that exist within the public sector including the suspension of the Bus Partnership Fund which has had a significant impact given the importance of the bus as a key public transport mode. Future investment in infrastructure and revenue support is key to improving services and driving an increase in patronage and a modal shift away from the private car. Current investment proposals, for example the Bus Infrastructure Fund, whilst welcome is not of the scale needed to affect significant change.

We welcome the Committee's ongoing interest and commend Better Buses for Strathclyde's commitment to improving buses for citizens. Committee members are welcome to contact us to see the case for change element of our regional bus strategy.

## **SWestrans written submission, 10 January 2025**

### **PE2116/I: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers**

This document is the SWestrans response to the above petition considered by the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions (CPPP) Committee at its meeting on Wednesday 27 November 2024. At this meeting, the CPPP Committee recommended that Regional Transport Partnerships were consulted for their views on the above proposals.

SWestrans is the regional transport authority for the South West of Scotland, covering the local authority region of Dumfries and Galloway Council. An estimated 148,290 people resided in the SWestrans area in 2020 according to Scottish Government statistics. This equates to 2.7% of the total population of Scotland which was 5,466,000 in 2020. The Partnership area covers 6,426 square kilometres which is 8.1% of the total 78,789 square kilometres land mass of Scotland. The population density of the region is just 23 people per square kilometre compared to the national average of 69 people per square kilometre.

The largely rural nature and low population density has implications for the provision of effective and efficient transport. In particular, it is difficult to provide commercially viable public transport services in areas with dispersed populations. As such, SWestrans is keen to explore any mechanisms by which it might promote and facilitate travel by bus in and around the region.

On the subject of bus franchising, SWestrans is aware that this has not yet been applied to an area as rural as Dumfries and Galloway and whilst the RTP is currently undertaking an exercise to recontract the existing bus network, it is not actively considering a bus franchise model. However, SWestrans is always considering ways in which it can plan for the future and ensure that the bus network continues to be fit



for purpose and delivered in an affordable, cost-effective way. As such, any support that could be offered in order to understand the potential benefits of a bus franchising approach in future would be very welcome, to help mitigate against the many challenges facing the bus network.

As such, introducing the regulations and statutory guidance required to give bus franchising powers full effect would be an inevitable pre-cursor to any move in this direction by SWestrans in future, and we would be supportive of these powers being provided as soon as possible. We are aware that other Scottish regions are more actively considering bus franchising and the opportunity to learn from the experiences of others through their own franchising model would be invaluable.

As above, SWestrans would also be supportive of the removal of the requirement for proposed franchising frameworks to be approved by a panel appointed by the traffic commissioner. SWestrans is of the view that there could be potential conflicts of interest through a traffic commissioner appointed panel reviewing such proposals.

As SWestrans is a model three RTP, with responsibility for delivery of the local public transport network, it would also be SWestrans that would potentially propose a franchised model. As such, in providing a level of independent review and challenge, SWestrans would not be best placed for such an application. SWestrans suggests that an additional source of review and scrutiny be considered.

Lastly, additional funding to help support RTPs in preparing franchising frameworks and assisting them with initial set-up costs once frameworks are approved would be of significant help. The absence of available funding to support the establishment of bus franchise frameworks is potentially holding some RTPs back and making this available would help set-up the first rural area models for SWestrans to learn from.

## **SPT written submission<sup>1</sup>, 10 January 2025**

### **PE2116/J: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers**

#### **Background**

SPT is the Regional Transport Partnership (RTP) and Public Transport Authority for the west of Scotland, with an area comprising twelve local authorities and a population of 2.14m people. SPT plays a key role in coordinating the public transport network across our area and we work closely with our constituent councils, operators and others to seek to ensure that people across Strathclyde have access to facilities and activities including healthcare, employment, education, leisure, shopping, and visiting family and friends. SPT also acts to encourage more sustainable travel through our programme of investment in a range of initiatives across all modes of transport, and, on a revenue basis, supports socially necessary bus services across the west of Scotland, including the MyBus demand responsive transport service. Further information on SPT and the services we provide is available at [www.spt.co.uk](http://www.spt.co.uk).

SPT is currently preparing the Strathclyde Regional Bus Strategy (SRBS) and as part of this process has been reviewing the Bus Powers contained in the Transport

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<sup>1</sup> Please note this response is to be considered at SPT's Strategy and Programmes Committee on 21 February 2025 and should be treated as draft until then.

(Scotland) Act 2019. The development of a Strathclyde Regional Bus Strategy has its foundations in SPT's A Call To Action: The Regional Transport Strategy (RTS) for the west of Scotland (2023 – 2038). The RTS recognises and promotes the importance of bus in our region and to that end, the need for the development of the SRBS was identified in light of the issues facing bus, and the potential opportunities available through the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019.

In 2024, [we undertook a public consultation seeking views on which recommended options should be considered further as part of the SRBS](#). Following an analysis of the SRBS consultation responses, SPT's Partnership Board approved the following recommendations to be reflected in the draft SRBS:

- Business As Usual and Voluntary Partnerships should be ruled out as a means to deliver a better bus network as more radical intervention is required.
- SPT should commence work on franchising, in line with the requirements of the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019.
- SPT will consider developing business case(s) for small-scale municipal bus company(ies) aimed at providing socially necessary services in parts of the region where private operators are currently very limited.
- SPT, and our partners, should progress with the necessary transition arrangements appropriate (e.g. time-limited, voluntary partnerships or other agreements aimed at improving the bus network) to provide a structured basis for private and public sector collaboration in attempting to arrest further passenger decline and stabilise the bus network in the pre-franchising period.

SPT is currently finalising the draft SRBS, which will be presented to SPT's Strategy and Programmes Committee in February 2025, at which approval to undertake a 12-week public consultation over March-May 2025 will be sought. The final SRBS will be presented to the SPT Partnership Board for approval in September 2025.

#### **SPT comments on the Petition:**

- Point raised in petition: "Introducing, without delay, the regulations and statutory guidance required to give bus franchising powers full effect"

SPT comments: SPT is keen to see the Regulations and Guidance associated with the Act complete and published in full particularly given that we are currently undertaking the work noted above to develop the SRBS which may result in utilisation of the Act's Bus Powers. Transport Scotland (TS) has advised that it intends to publish guidance on both franchising and bus service improvement partnerships in Spring 2025. TS has also advised that it is working on a final set of Regulations for franchising, covering the process from transitioning into and out of a franchise, which includes extending the registration period for changes to bus services. This would complete the necessary Regulations and Guidance associated with the Bus Powers in the Transport (Scotland) 2019 Act.

SPT has engaged with Transport Scotland and Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers (ATCO) through a Working Group to support the preparation of the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 Regulations and Guidance and we welcome the

opportunity Transport Scotland has provided to gather and reflect feedback by key partners as the process has developed. We would note that our responses to the points raised in the Public Petition do not commit SPT to a particular course of action in relation to the Bus Powers in the Act.

During this period however, SPT would welcome consideration of any improvements which may be identified following the issue of the Better Buses Bill applicable in England and Wales which is seeking to address learnings from early adopters of Bus Reform work.

- Point raised in petition: “Amending the 2019 Act to remove the requirement for proposed franchising frameworks to be approved by a panel appointed by the traffic commissioner, instead empowering Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs) to have the final say on approving proposals”

SPT comments: [SPT expressed concerns about the panel in its response to the consultation undertaken by Transport Scotland on the Act’s Bus Powers in 2021](#). As a matter of public record, these concerns remain.

However, at this advanced stage in the development of the Act’s Regulations and approaching publication of the finalised Guidance, we acknowledge this process is now firmly enshrined in law.

Notwithstanding the concerns previously raised by SPT, the change as proposed by the Petitioner would, by necessity, require development by the Scottish Government of an alternative proposal, consultation and, more fundamentally, further amendment of the Act. While Scotland remains an exception in the UK by retaining such a panel process, it is also evident that any change may result in further significant delay and introduce additional or new risks to any local transport authority such as SPT considering taking forward a franchising framework at this time.

Given the above, should the Scottish Parliament move to amend these provisions, SPT would seek assurances from the Scottish Government that any change can be made timeously and without delay. SPT would be concerned by any amendments that further delay the issue of regulations and guidance given the length of time to date. Specifically, we would seek assurance that any change would not materially impact on the timeline required to undertake a Franchise Assessment nor introduce additional risks to any authority considering Franchising as a means of improving bus networks for the travelling public in Scotland.

- Point raised in petition: Providing additional funding to help support RTPs in preparing franchising frameworks and assisting them with initial set-up costs once frameworks are approved.

SPT comment: SPT firmly believes that the appropriate funding is made available by the Scottish Government / Transport Scotland to ensure that Local Transport Authorities intending to review and potentially take forward the Bus Powers contained in the Transport (Scotland) Act can do so effectively. Planning, developing and implementing significant reform plans, including ensuring compliance with Scottish Government due processes, require a substantial commitment of resources and expertise to ensure that any proposals emerging are robust in meeting the complex requirements of the legislation, including in terms of appropriate

communication, engagement, consultation and business case development and to support any set up costs associated with a preferred approach. To date no additional or specific resources have been made available to SPT at this time, and this has been identified as a key risk to the successful delivery of the bus reform agenda.

## **Confederation of Passenger Transport (CPT) Scotland written submission, 24 January 2025**

### **PE2116/K: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers**

The petition refers throughout to RTPs (Regional Transport Partnerships) in relation to its calls for funding and approving franchising proposals. It would be more accurate to refer to local transport authorities (LTAs) as this is the language used in the Act, as there are differences between the different RTPs in Scotland.

Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (the assumed focus of the petition) is both a local transport authority and a Regional Transport Partnership. Legislation has given SPT, Swestrans and ZetTrans the ability to exercise certain functions related to bus services but this is not the case for the other RTPs in Scotland.

**Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to improve the process for implementing the bus franchising powers contained in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 by:**

- **introducing, without delay, the regulations and statutory guidance required to give bus franchising powers full effect**

CPT would also like to see these remaining regulations and guidance, for both franchising and Bus Service Improvement Partnerships, introduced as soon as possible. This will give all stakeholders, including bus operators, of which there are more than 300, large and small, in Scotland more clarity on the options available and potential impact upon them. Until this is available, some, particularly smaller operators, cannot effectively plan for the longer term on issues such as investment in the zero emission vehicles needed to address the climate emergency. Having these regulations and guidance in place will also help better inform any future consultation activity, for example by SPT, who have signalled a preference for franchising.

- **amending the 2019 Act to remove the requirement for proposed franchising frameworks to be approved by a panel appointed by the traffic commissioner, instead empowering Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs) to have the final say on approving proposals**

Under the Act, local transport authorities should prepare and submit their franchising proposals to the independent panel. The panel must then decide whether or not to approve the franchising proposal and must consider, among other things, whether the local transport authority has reached a reasonable conclusion in deciding to make, vary or revoke the franchising framework. By the point at which a franchising framework is submitted to a panel it will have already been subject to extensive consultation and possible modification.

The petition disagrees with the Act's requirement for proposed franchising frameworks to be approved by a panel convened by the Traffic Commissioner, which

was also discussed by the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee and by the wider Scottish Parliament in October 2024 when considering the Local Services Franchises (Traffic Commissioner Notices and Panels) (Scotland) Regulations 2024.

The intent of the panel in the Act is to provide a safeguard (for example reducing the likelihood of legal challenge which could also lead to lengthy delays), and, when giving evidence to the NZET Committee, Transport Scotland confirmed that were this step to be removed another safeguard would have to be considered.

Under the petitioner's suggestion an RTP/LTA would be approving its own proposal. The petitioner asserts that the Traffic Commissioner is "neither democratically-accountable nor impartial". The same observation could also be made of SPT as it has several appointed members who are not democratically elected Councillors.

The Traffic Commissioner for Scotland (a currently vacant post) is "*appointed by the Secretary of State for Transport but is an independent public post holder. They act both as independent regulators and in a judicial role, as single person tribunals when conducting public inquiries in relation to licence applications and disciplinary matters and demonstrate impartiality in all aspects of decision making.*" The person specification for the role states they must "*demonstrate a solid commitment to high ethical standards of integrity and honesty.*" The former Traffic Commissioner for Scotland has made comments on her views on franchising, but these were made in a personal capacity, not as a representative of the Office.

The draft regulations prevent a person from sitting on the panel who could, in the opinion of the Traffic Commissioner, reasonably give rise to a concern as to whether that person could act impartially as a panel member.

There have been references made to parts of England where franchising is also being pursued. In England while there is no panel, there is still a requirement to obtain an independent assurance report from an auditor on its assessment which has to be published with the public consultation<sup>2</sup>. This process of independent assessment is also in the Bus Services Bill, although it makes some changes to who can conduct the assessments beyond registered Auditors.

Rather than amending the legislation, thus delaying regulations, guidance and thus franchising further, we would instead encourage the Scottish Government and Transport Scotland to allay the concerns expressed in both the petition and in parliamentary scrutiny about the panel and the Traffic Commissioners role in convening this, with robust guidance on panel members, their role and expected behaviour.

- **providing additional funding to help support RTPs in preparing franchising frameworks and assisting them with initial set-up costs once frameworks are approved**

As above, it would be more accurate to refer to support for LTAs. This request makes an assumption that all parts of Scotland would take the same RTP/regional led approach to considering franchising as SPT have done.

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<sup>2</sup> [Setting up a bus franchising scheme](#), updated Dec 2024

Franchising is only one of the options the 2019 Act gives to local transport authorities, the others being local transport authority run services, and statutory Bus Service Improvement Partnerships. As in England, with the Bus Services Bill the choice is not purely franchising vs the status quo, or a one size fits all approach, but instead a variety of options and indeed different models of franchising (including but not limited to gross cost, net cost/ minimum subsidy, route by route franchising). LTAs must not be constrained by having to follow one model (e.g. gross cost as per Manchester and London).

Any financial support provided to Scotland's LTAs must therefore be to consider all the options available to them to meet local needs. Financial support, for example, for bus priority measures can help achieve the improvements passengers most value, in increased reliability and improved journey times.

The Government should be clear from the outset as to how much funding will be required for each LTA. LTAs will have to fund an assessment, staff resources to run consultations, and will then face huge transition and implementation costs.

For example, in England, on the process and depot acquisition alone, Greater Manchester estimated costs of £78.40 per person. West Yorkshire Combined Authority estimate franchising transition and management costs at £20 million with £84 million for depot acquisition and fit out — around £44 per person. Liverpool City Region estimate franchising implementation costs at £31 million and depot acquisition and investment at £70 million— around £66 per person<sup>3</sup>. Combined Authorities in England are looking to increase the Mayoral precepts to help to cover costs –not available in Scotland.

## **Nestrans written submission, 24 January 2025**

### **PE2116/L: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers**

Thank you for inviting us to comment on the above petition which was discussed by the committee on 27th November 2024. Nestrans is the Regional Transport Partnership (RTP) for north east Scotland, covering the local authority areas of Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire. The population of the region is approximately half a million people and covers 8.3% of the geographical area of Scotland. The Nestrans Board is made up of four councillors from each of Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council. The Board also includes a professional advisor from each council, and four non-councillor members. The partnership is supported by an executive team of nine officers with 7 staff full-time and 2 staff part-time.

The above highlights how Nestrans and SPT differ as Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs). The Transport (Scotland) Act 2005 established RTPs in doing so creating a three-tier model framework:

- Model 1 – Regional Strategy and limited transport powers
- Model 2 – Regional Strategy and some transport powers transferred

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<sup>3</sup> [IPPR report January 2025, Change you can board](#)



- Model 3 – Regional Strategy and significant public transport powers transferred

Nestrans is a Model 1 partnership, meaning we have limited transport powers compared to SPT who are a Model 3 partnership. As a Model 1 partnership, we have a statutory duty to prepare a regional transport strategy which must be kept under review and updated as necessary such as to reflect changes in policy context. The Regional Transport Strategy (RTS) for the north east was approved by the Scottish Minister in November 2021 following a refresh to recognise National Transport Strategy 2 (NTS2). [The RTS sets out the partnership's vision for the transport network in the north east to 2040 – Nestrans 2040](#).

As specified, with limited transport powers, we rely on collaboration between ourselves and our two councils in facilitating passenger transport services in our region. For this reason, the strategic commitments on the provision of bus services is reserved to the local authorities. Both local authorities are currently reviewing their local transport strategies and Aberdeenshire are also reviewing their passenger transport strategy. In the current [Draft Passenger Transport Strategy](#), it states the following policy commitment on franchising: “The Council will determine the potential risks and benefits of implementing a franchising framework, should local circumstances arise that merit such action”. Whilst in Aberdeen City, the draft Local Transport Strategy references the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 as an opportunity.

In 2018, the North East Bus Alliance was established through a Quality Partnership Agreement, building on a long-standing voluntary relationship. Partners of the Alliance are Aberdeen City Council, Aberdeenshire Council, Nestrans, First Aberdeen, Stagecoach Bluebird, and Bains Coaches. The partnership meets 10 times per year through a Board and Executive group with the Board chaired by an Independent representative and the views of passengers represented by Bus Users Scotland. We see value as a partnership in evolving this current Quality Partnership Agreement to a Bus Services Improvement Partnership (BSIP) which was also enabled through the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019. To date the partnership has been facilitated by Nestrans and by moving to a BSIP this would see control move to the two councils. This is because under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 the new powers are afforded to the two councils as the local transport authorities in the region. Nestrans will continue to support work to introduce a BSIP for the north east of Scotland, recognising the benefits this will have for bus services in our region.

Progress on establishing a BSIP for the region was a key requirement of the Bus Partnership Fund (BPF). In 2021, Aberdeen City Council on behalf of the Alliance was awarded £12 million in BPF monies to enable improvements to South College Street and to introduce a City Centre Bus Priority loop. Funding also enabled the progression of multi-modal corridor studies that identify bus priority opportunities along the key routes into Aberdeen. Through partnership working and our Bus Action Plan, we were able to demonstrate that since April 2020 over £5 million has been invested into the network by Alliance partners. A key long-term vision for the partnership has been working towards introducing Aberdeen Rapid Transit (ART) – a bus-based rapid transit system which will provide a step change to the public transport network in the region. ART is recognised as a desirable opportunity within the policy context in order to achieve the significant policy ambition locally, regionally and nationally.

[The Vision for ART was updated in 2024](#) following an appraisal process that formalised an agreed desired routeing. It is important to highlight current appraisal work for ART is looking at its delivery, considering the costs and risks associated with being delivered through a franchise. The publication of statutory guidance and further legislation in relation to the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 would be welcomed. This would help to provide a well-informed assessment of options and in progressing improvements to bus services in the region in the short/medium term.

The provision of bus services in rural areas is reducing and we believe innovative solutions are needed. Current concession fares support is not working, as without a reliable bus service a concession card is of limited value. In order to achieve innovative solutions, it is likely that exploration of the delivery of services will have to be considered with adequate funding required to do so. We welcome the introduction of the Bus Infrastructure Fund for 2025/26 following the disruptive pause of the Bus Partnership Fund this financial year. We hope for its approval in February 2025 and subsequently hopeful of working with Transport Scotland on projects in our region. In order to facilitate a transformative BSIP, adequate capital and revenue funding needs to be in place to support any ambitious plans. In England, Enhanced Partnerships and Bus Service Improvement Plans have been supported by UK Government support.

To conclude, Nestrans is in a different position to SPT in that we are looking into the toolbox of options for improving bus provision in the north east. Subsequently we do not believe at this stage we are able to comment on the approval process of a franchise. However as detailed, this is subject to change with franchising being considered for the delivery of ART and may be considered in some aspect across the region at a later date. If further consideration is given to franchising for any level across the north east, greater staff and financial resource would be required. Consideration would also need to be given to the practicalities of this within the current arrangement and would likely require a significant shift regionally in the way bus provision is conducted should a large scale franchise be pursued.

We trust that this response is useful and provides the Committee with an understanding of developments on franchising beyond Strathclyde. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

## **Bus Users UK written submission, 30 January 2025**

### **PE2116/M: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers**

#### **Summary**

Bus Users UK response to the petition calling on Scottish Parliament to urge Scottish Government to improve the process for implementing the bus franchising powers contained in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 by:

- introducing, without delay, the regulations and statutory guidance required to give bus franchising powers full effect
- amending the 2019 Act to remove the requirement for proposed franchising frameworks to be approved by a panel appointed by the Traffic



Commissioner, instead empowering Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs) to have the final say on approving proposals

- providing additional funding to help support RTPs in preparing franchising frameworks and assisting them with initial set-up costs once frameworks are approved.

**Point 1:**

It is our understanding that local authorities and RTPs are awaiting further guidance from Transport Scotland which is due out later this year. The many bus partnerships and alliances in which Bus Users UK actively participates are also awaiting this guidance as they have been progressing the voluntary bus partnership model with a view to moving towards full BSIPs.

The primary aim of franchising should be to improve bus services for passengers: any other motive will not deliver the desired outcomes. Furthermore, franchising in the short to medium term will only be possible in large urban areas like Glasgow. This means passengers who live in more rural areas are unlikely to see service improvements and may, in fact, experience reduced services, as operators focus on ensuring services within the franchise operate as they should.

There is also the question of expertise within the RTP/ local authority realm and, of course, the required capacity to manage and operate such a franchise. The various public transport teams across local authorities often have limited staff and resources so the introduction of a franchise would require significant input from the Scottish Government to manage it effectively.

Finally, greater emphasis and additional funding would be required to implement more extensive and enforced bus priority measures, increased management control over roadworks, reduction in on-street parking arrangements and the restriction of private vehicle movements in urban areas, all of which are needed to improve bus journey times. Otherwise franchised services will operate no more reliably than existing commercial ones.

**Point 2:**

The panel proposed under current measures is designed to provide the checks and balances required for approving new franchising frameworks. While there are merits of empowering RTPs to do this task to streamline the process, the specific expertise that the Traffic Commissioner would possess is key to ensuring appropriate scrutiny is applied. Likewise, it could be argued that the RTP is not best placed to make this decision, as they would be too close to the operating environment and not, therefore, as impartial as they should be. The process for approving a franchise must be transparent and robust, with the passenger at the heart of any decision making.

With any initial franchise being considered, it is more likely to secure the trust and confidence of the public if appropriate systems of scrutiny and accountability are in place.

**Point 3:**

Set up and implementation costs are likely to be significant. SPT has already published what some of these costs will look like as it is currently carrying out research into franchising. The questions that must be asked are why should Scottish Government provide additional funding and could this money have greater impact on bus services if it was spent elsewhere? This might be through appropriate ring fenced funding via local authorities to fund supported bus services that are not commercially viable.

Franchising is likely to have far less impact on these supported services. Scotland is largely rural - even in the 12 local authority areas that make up SPT, a vast number of the local bus services are delivered by SPT under contract, as they are not commercially viable. Under franchise agreements, this is not likely to change.

The funding model for bus services in Scotland and indeed across the UK, requires an overhaul. The costs of operating services increases year on year due to wages, fuel, vehicle maintenance, fleet upgrades etc. There has been no evidence to suggest that franchising will reduce these costs. If passenger numbers are to increase by any significant margin, then bus services must be quicker, more reliable and more accessible, and bus networks need to grow, not decline, as is the case under the current model.

A change of ownership will not automatically deliver these benefits, so other levers must be pulled.

Franchising set up costs that will not directly benefit passengers require careful consideration, especially when public spend on bus services in Scotland is significantly less than rail, with many communities currently living in transport poverty.

### **About Bus Users UK**

Bus Users UK is a charity that campaigns for inclusive, accessible transport. We are the only approved Alternative Dispute Resolution Body for the bus and coach industry and the designated body for handling complaints under the Passenger Rights in Bus and Coach Legislation. We are also part of the Sustainable Transport Alliance, a group working to promote the benefits of public, shared and active travel.

Alongside our complaints work we investigate and monitor services and work with operators and transport providers to improve services for everyone. We run events, carry out research, respond to consultations, speak at government select committees and take part in industry events to make sure the voice of the passenger is heard.

## **UK Department for Transport written submission, 11 February 2025**

### **PE2116/N: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers**

Thank you for your letter of 5 December 2024 to the Secretary of State about PE2116: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers.

The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to improve the process for implementing the bus franchising powers contained in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019.

I am grateful to the Committee for the opportunity to comment. However, due to transport being a devolved matter for the Scottish Government, it would not be appropriate for me to do so. It is expected that all options were thoroughly evaluated during the policy development phase when the legislation was initially presented to the Scottish Parliament.

As you may be aware, the post of Traffic Commissioner for Scotland is currently vacant, and the functions are being covered by the Senior Traffic Commissioner in his capacity as Deputy Traffic Commissioner for Scotland. A recruitment exercise was held in early 2024 and was unsuccessful in finding an appointable candidate. Officials are working towards re-running this campaign in Spring 2025. Representatives from both UK Government and the Scottish Government have been involved in both recruitment rounds.

The Senior Traffic Commissioner and his officials will, of course, continue to work with Scottish Government officials to implement any approved scheme.

Yours sincerely,

**Simon Lightwood MP**

**Minister For Local Transport**

**West Yorkshire Combined Authority written submission, 13 February 2025**

**PE2116/O: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers**

We consider that information on the experiences of the West Yorkshire Combined Authority in introducing bus franchising is well-suited to discussion and have undertaken a wide range of knowledge-sharing engagements in recent months directly with transport authorities across the UK who are considering options for bus reform, including authorities within Scotland. We would be willing to consider a similar approach if that would be of value to this case.

We do, however, note significant differences between Scotland and England in relation to bus franchising in terms of both the established legislative process and proposed changes to legislation (with the Bus Services Bill currently progressing through the UK Parliament).

**Lothian Buses written submission, 10 April 2025**

**PE2116/P: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers**

Thank you for contacting Lothian.

As the UK's largest municipal bus operator, Lothian is committed to delivering a reliable, affordable, high frequency network across Edinburgh and the Lothians.

With over 2 million customer journeys each week, Lothian is a major socio-economic contributor at both a local and national level. This can be further evidenced by added-value factors which provide significant additional economic, social and environmental benefits.

In the last 10 years, Lothian have returned over £36million in dividends to its Local Authority Shareholders.

We are monitoring the progression of legislative and policy developments on franchising, including the publishing of the secondary legislation.

## **HITRANS written submission, 16 April 2025**

### **PE2116/Q: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the above petition, which was discussed by the Committee on 27th November 2024.

HITRANS is the Regional Transport Partnership (RTP) for the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, covering the local authority areas of Highland, Moray, Western Isles, Orkney Islands, and Argyll and Bute (excluding Helensburgh and Lomond). This region encompasses approximately 50% of Scotland's landmass and is home to around half a million people, with significant rural, island and remote communities. The HITRANS Board includes councillor representatives from each of our five partner councils, as well as non-councillor members and professional advisors. The Partnership is supported by a small executive team based in Inverness, with a regional remit to develop and implement a Regional Transport Strategy.

As a Model 1 RTP under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2005, HITRANS has a statutory responsibility to prepare a Regional Transport Strategy (RTS), which is kept under regular review and updated to reflect evolving local and national transport policy. The current RTS identifies a vision for sustainable, inclusive and accessible transport that meets the distinct needs of our dispersed population and geography. Key priorities include:

- Improved connectivity across rural, island and urban areas
- Reduced transport-related carbon emissions in support of Net Zero
- Safe and inclusive transport networks
- Better integration of public transport and active travel
- Resilient and reliable services for communities with limited alternatives
- Investment in ferry, bus, and rail infrastructure that supports economic and social outcomes

Given HITRANS' limited statutory powers, we rely on strong collaboration with our partner councils, who retain responsibility for the provision and regulation of passenger transport services. Local transport strategies and delivery plans are developed at local authority level, and these shape the context for any future consideration of enhanced regulatory models, such as franchising or Bus Service Improvement Partnerships (BSIPs).

In 2020, HITRANS supported the establishment of the Highlands Bus Partnership, bringing together Highland Council, HITRANS, bus operators, and NHS Highland to

improve bus services with support from Transport Scotland's Bus Partnership Fund. While early progress has been made on developing a Bus Service Improvement Plan that helps in identifying priorities for investment, our region's unique geography and low population density present challenges that differ markedly from more urban areas.

Franchising is not currently being actively pursued within the HITRANS region; however, we recognise its potential value as one option within the broader "toolbox" provided by the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019. It is important that local circumstances, including financial viability, operator capability and community needs, are carefully assessed before moving forward. We would welcome the publication of further statutory guidance on franchising to support robust assessment and decision-making.

It is worth noting that, to a very large extent, franchising is already in place across much of the Highlands and Islands bus network. Services in these areas are almost entirely secured through local government contract tendering, meaning they are effectively managed and funded through the public purse. Despite this structured approach, these areas have not been immune to the national trend of declining bus mileage and passenger numbers. In fact, reductions have been at least as significant in rural and island areas, where constrained funding available to local authorities has resulted in significant network contraction.

In 2021, [HITRANS prepared a report titled Rural Bus Service Support and Funding](#), which addresses these challenges in detail. The report was approved by the five HITRANS partner Councils and shared with Transport Scotland at the time of publication.

The paper sought to make the case for increased funding interventions to enable meaningful mode shift from the private car in rural and island communities—an ambition closely aligned with the National Transport Strategy's inclusive Vision. This strategy commits to being a Transport Strategy for all of Scotland, acknowledging the varying needs and challenges faced across the country and aiming to break down the silos that have traditionally characterised responsibility for Scotland's transport infrastructure, services and assets.

The HITRANS report captures the long-term impact on rural bus services across Scotland over the past 15 years and outlines a series of recommended actions for Government consideration. Chief among these was the proposal to establish a Rural Transport Fund. While no specific methodology for calculating such a fund was provided, the expectation was that it would build on the successful formula used for the Rural Transport Fund that supported local authorities between 1998 and 2008.

We are also aware of the pressing need for innovative and sustainable solutions to maintain and enhance rural bus networks, many of which have experienced significant service reductions in recent years. In some areas, concessionary travel schemes offer limited value without reliable services in place. Financial constraints faced by our local authority partners have also impacted supported bus services, reducing access and connectivity for many rural communities. This underscores the need for long-term reform and greater national funding support for bus services.

HITRANS welcomed the Bus Partnership Fund (BPF) and its role in driving investment in bus priority and infrastructure. We were disappointed by the pause in funding in 2024/25 but are encouraged by the proposed Bus Infrastructure Fund in 2025/26. Continued support from Transport Scotland will be essential to enable transformative regional initiatives, including future BSIPs, demand-responsive transport pilots, and ferry-bus integration schemes.

In England, we have noted the significant UK Government support given to rural areas such as Cornwall, which shares some geographical similarities with parts of our region. Equivalent funding and strategic support from the Scottish Government would help to ensure that the Highlands and Islands can also benefit from improvements in public transport.

To conclude, HITRANS is committed to working in partnership to deliver better bus services across our region. At this stage, we are not in a position to comment on the franchise approval process directly, as franchising has not yet been actively pursued in our area. However, we are monitoring developments closely and may consider this option for specific corridors or island hubs in the future. Should franchising or BSIP delivery be progressed further, significant additional staffing and financial resources would be required to support their development and delivery.

We trust that this response helps to inform the Committee's considerations and provides insight into the specific challenges and opportunities facing the Highlands and Islands in the context of bus service reform. Should you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact us.

## **Petitioner written submission, 15 September 2025**

### **PE2116/R: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers**

#### **Mass Public Support for bus franchising**

In February this year Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT) published decisive plans to take forward the bus franchising powers in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 as central to their [Strathclyde Regional Bus Strategy](#). (SPT began developing the Strategy in June 2023 and it is due to be approved by their Board this Friday 19 September 2025).

Through implementing bus franchising, SPT aim to deliver the fully-integrated, affordable and reliable public transport network urgently needed by our region, which has the most bus users in Scotland.

**There is mass public support for this policy.** This is evidenced by the unprecedented number of responses to SPT's two public consultations on bus reform – [3,072 in 2024](#) and [4,091 in 2025](#) – and in the success of our Better Buses for Strathclyde campaign (launched September 2023) which is now supported by more than [12,000 people](#) and [50 organisations](#) – nearly 5,000 of whom have also signed this Scottish Parliament petition.

As highlighted in [our last written evidence on 12 November 2024](#) – there is **cross-party support from MSPs for bus franchising**, including from the Scottish Government, with Minister Jim Fairlie MSP telling the [NZET Committee on 29](#)

[October 2024](#): “our position is that we want to get franchising done, and we want it to work.”

This cross-party support was demonstrated at the [first consideration of this petition on 27 November 2024](#), when five MSPs came to speak in support of our aims and through the many contributions from MSPs at the special hour-long debate on “[The Future for Glasgow’s Bus Services](#)” in the Chamber on 26 June 2025, where Paul Sweeney MSP stated:

“...**there is a consensus across the region** that the continued situation is unsustainable and socially unjust. That is ultimately what has come across in the debate.”

### **Mounting frustration at continued delays**

Despite all of this – in the ten months since this petition was first considered – all we’ve seen from the Scottish Government is **further delays** and what [Audit Scotland has described](#) as a complete “lack of leadership”. The statutory guidance [promised “before the end” of 2024](#) has since been [delayed three times](#), and still has **no concrete timeline** for publication. The Minister’s latest position seems to be that:

“the draft statutory guidance is currently undergoing an internal review prior to final engagement with key parties on the franchising process... Once that process is completed, it is my intention to share the draft guidance with the NZET Committee along with affected parties... Final timescales for publication will depend on the capacity of these stakeholders to consider and engage with the draft document.” – [Letter to the NZET Committee](#), 25 June 2025

**These continued delays are completely unacceptable.** As other evidence shows, they are affecting SPT’s (and other RTPs’) ability to progress plans and/or properly consider using the powers in the 2019 Act. In contrast to the Scottish Government’s now near **six-year delay** in publishing the guidance, the [equivalent guidance for England’s Bus Services Act 2017](#) was ready within just two months and last year was refined *twice* to make it “easier, quicker and cheaper for local authorities to intervene on bus routes.”

One possible reason why the guidance is taking so long, is the Scottish Government finally realising just how unworkable and costly the processes they have created in the Act are. A good illustration of the **significant issues with the legislation** is set out in [SPT’s draft Strategy](#) (p.78), which highlights the risks inherent in the panel approval process and also the “tight and onerous timescales” enforced by [Sections 13K\(2\) and 13Q\(1\)](#) – neither of which exist in the [equivalent English legislation](#).

The [costs of convening the panel](#) – if similar to that which rejected the NEXUS proposal in 2015 (a national embarrassment that led to the removal of the panel process from the English legislation in 2017) – could be around £280,000 (allowing for inflation) and delay the process by a year. These **significant and unnecessary costs** created by the Scottish legislation are now subject to “negotiations” between the Scottish and UK Governments over who will foot the bill, as the Traffic Commissioner for Scotland (the person empowered to convene the panel) is appointed by Westminster. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the parties [should be provided to the NZET Committee later this year](#).

How can the Scottish Government justify wasting this significant sum on [a completely unnecessary step already proven not to work in England?](#)

This summer, Get Glasgow Moving published "[The Long Road to Bus Franchising](#)" – research illustrating the extent to which **Scotland now lags behind other parts of the UK** in delivering bus franchising, as a result of these severe delays and the complexities and risks created by the Scottish legislation ([download a PDF of the graphic here](#)).

SPT's timeline, taken from [their draft Strategy](#) (p.76), estimates it will take three years (from the Strategy's approval on 19 September 2025) to get through the complex processes in the Act (see [Section 13C for an overview](#)) and then up to another two-and-a-half years to implement bus franchising, taking us up to 2030-2031. By this date, bus franchising will have been [rolled-out across the whole of Wales](#), and in up to eight of England's biggest city regions, improving the lives of nearly 19 million people.

As Sarah Boyack MSP told the [NZET Committee on 27 May 2025](#) when the final bus franchising SSI was being discussed:

"...the issue is about the sheer length of time that the franchising process will take. The requirements are too onerous. The process needs to be simplified –it is too complex and too time consuming... Compared with the process in England... **We... need a reality check**, because it could be 2030 before we see bus franchising in Scotland. That means that people will not get the bus services that they need."

## **Petitioner written submission, 15 September 2025**

### **PE2116/S: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers**

#### **We need to see action now**

There is now **a small window of time** before the 2026 election in which to make progress. We need the Scottish Government to admit there are significant issues with the bus franchising legislation and take steps to fix them.

We stand by the 'course of action' outlined in [our written evidence on 12 November 2024](#) (p.2). Firstly, we demand the **immediate publication of the statutory guidance** – without this the Scottish Government is *solely responsible* for further delaying [SPT's timeline for delivering bus franchising](#).

Then, we must see a short '**Transport (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill**' introduced to simplify the Scottish legislation and bring it into line with England's now tried-and-tested Bus Services Act 2017 ([we have drafted the necessary amendments here](#)). As SPT say in [their evidence to the Committee](#) this must be done "timeously and without delay" to support and accelerate their pioneering work.

If the Scottish Government really wants "[to get franchising done, and \[for\] it to work](#)" then it must **provide financial support to SPT** and other RTPs wishing to deliver it.

On 4 June 2025 [Rachel Reeves announced £15.6bn investment](#) in public transport for England's big city regions, with each receiving **between £1bn-2.5bn** over five



years to deliver and/or enhance bus franchising and build new infrastructure. This announcement should result in [Barnett Consequentials for the Scottish Government](#) of approximately £1.3bn. It is vital that **these funds are spent in the same way in Scotland** or the Glasgow city region will fall even further behind our English comparators. As [Centre for Cities' research](#) shows, Glasgow's economy **currently underperforms by £7bn annually** in part due to poor public transport connectivity. Supporting SPT to deliver bus franchising is the first step towards rectifying this. Indicative costs are set out below:

**Between 2025-2028:** [SPT estimate](#) they need **up to £15m** to complete the complex processes set out in the Act (this sum would be significantly reduced if the Act was simplified). Although SPT have managed to [reclassify £12m reserves](#) to meet most these costs, specific support from the Scottish Government would expedite the process and recognise SPT's role as the "trailblazer for future possibilities" (as [described by the Minister](#)) creating a blueprint for other RTPs to follow.

**Between 2028-2031:** we estimate SPT require **between £100-200m** to roll-out bus franchising plans, based on estimates in [Centre for Cities' report](#) (p.27) and the useful [figures provided in CPT's evidence](#) for the transition and depot acquisition/fit-out costs in the first three English city regions to pursue bus franchising.

It is useful to contextualise this figure with the population of the SPT area (roughly 40% of Scotland) and the current total annual bill for bus services – £468.2m in the [2025-26 budget](#). As shown in [our first evidence submitted on 11 October 2024](#), this is currently being spent in a completely inefficient way under the deregulated system. Implementing bus franchising would help create clear accountability and better value for money going forward.

**From 2031 onwards:** the rest of the £1.3bn (from the Barnett Consequentials) should be used to deliver the [steps set out for years 5-10 in Centre for Cities' plan](#) for improving public transport in the Glasgow city region, with transport governance issues resolved by new legislation (see details below).

This would be a significant first step towards delivering [Clyde Metro](#) (one of the [STPR2 recommendations](#)). It is vital that the Scottish Government understands that **bus franchising is phase one of Clyde Metro**. Billed as "A fully integrated mass transit public transport system" – Clyde Metro will be impossible to deliver without SPT first having full control of the bus network.

With clear political will, it is possible to get commitments for the initial funding and the Amendment Bill before the election. With or without this, bus franchising looks set to become a big election issue. We would expect any new government to introduce the Amendment Bill within its first 100 days.

## **New legislation**

Once the 'Transport (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill' has been enacted, the new government should begin work on a larger Transport (Scotland) Bill. This should be informed by good practice from the [Welsh](#) and UK Governments, whose new [Bus Services Bill](#) (scheduled for Royal Assent this autumn) seeks to "[reduce the barriers to franchising, including costs](#)" for English regions.

Any new Transport Bill for Scotland must resolve the **ongoing transport governance issues** glaringly apparent in evidence submitted by the RTPs. SEStran write: “It is worth noting that all Regional Transport Partnerships are not created equally”, as they, along with Nestrans, Hitrans and Tactran, remain the most ineffectual ‘Model 1’ RTP with c. 6-10 staff each, compared to [SPT \(a ‘Model 3’ RTP\) which has c. 480 staff](#).

In a country whose [National Transport Strategy](#) is based around “reducing inequalities” this situation cannot be allowed to persist.

It is now clear that, at the time of writing the 2019 Act, the Scottish Government gave zero thought to how new bus franchising powers could interact with, and be used to enhance, the regional governance structures that the RTPs provide. In fact, it wasn’t until the passing of [The Transport Partnerships \(Transfer of Functions\) \(Scotland\) Order 2024](#) that ‘Model 3’ RTPs – SPT, Swestrans and ZetTrans – were even given permission to use the powers (the other RTPs still cannot).

Our petition ultimately aims for RTPs to be the public bodies which are empowered to use bus franchising powers (as opposed to single local authority areas) to help spread the benefits and costs and deliver regional connectivity. As highlighted by Get Glasgow Moving in [evidence submitted to the NZET Committee on 22 October 2024](#) (p.4), the successful implementation of bus franchising at a regional level by RTPs would be a significant step towards resolving Scotland’s transport governance issues.

If the Petitions Committee lacks the expertise or capacity to progress these demands, we ask that our petition is **urgently referred to the NZET Committee** who will be considering the statutory guidance for bus franchising and the MOU on the costs of the panel imminently.

## **Annexe D: Letter to the Convener of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee from the Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity, 25 June 2025**

Dear Convener,

Thank you for your letter of 12 June, in which you seek clarification on how the bus franchising model will be implemented and confirming when the Committee will receive a copy of the statutory guidance for bus franchising prior to its formal publication.

As I explained in Parliament, the draft statutory guidance is currently undergoing an internal review prior to final engagement with key parties on the franchising process, including the Competition and Markets Authority, and the Office of the Traffic Commissioner (OTC). Once that process is completed, it is my intention to share the draft guidance with the NZET Committee along with affected parties, including local transport authorities, regional transport partnerships, and operator representatives, prior to finalisation and formal publication.

Final timescales for publication will depend on the capacity of these stakeholders to consider and engage with the draft document. In the meantime, I would like to assure you that we have been engaging closely with local transport authorities, Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT), on the development of the draft guidance.

Turning to your question on timescales for full implementation of a franchising framework, this will very much depend on the size and scale of a local transport authority's franchising proposals. Only SPT has provided an estimate of 5 to 7 years to develop a franchising framework to the point of implementation. However, as you are aware, SPT is also considering other options, as well as franchising for improving the local bus network as part of their draft Strathclyde Regional Bus Strategy. The public consultation to their strategy ended on 29 May, and SPT are reviewing the responses they have received before they publish the final version of the Regional Bus Strategy later this year.

In addition to the statutory guidance for bus franchising, officials from Transport Scotland published an overview of the bus powers in 2024, which provides information and links to useful resources that local transport authorities need to consider when exploring the various powers. Officials can also talk to local transport authorities on an individual basis, about the bus powers, including franchising. However, it will be for each local transport authority to decide what flexible tools within the 2001 Act, if any, they want to use to improve bus provision in their area.

While there were no financial or administrative burdens place on local transport authorities via the Public Service Vehicles (Registration of Local Services) (Local Services Franchises Transitional Provisions) (Scotland) Regulations 2025, I can confirm that the Scottish Government did published a financial memorandum along with the Transport (Scotland) Bill.

A separate Business Regulatory Impact Assessment (BRIA) was published for our public consultation entitled “Implementing Part Three of the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, and a supplementary BRIA was published for the Local Services Franchises (Traffic Commissioner Notices and Panels) (Scotland) Regulations 2024.

Local transport authorities looking to use any of the bus powers, including partnership working, running their own services, or franchising will be required to undertake more detailed appraisals to determine which of the options they want to progress with. In a climate of increasing fiscal pressure, it is important that the business cases for improving bus services are made robustly and in an evidenced based way to support future decision making on funding.

I also want to stress that we are investing more than £2.6 billion in 2025-26 to support public transport and to make our transport system available, affordable, and accessible for all. In 2025-26, we are increasing funding for bus services and concessionary travel from £430 million in 2024-25 to almost £465 million.

I recognise that franchising is a valuable tool for local transport authorities to improve services in their area. However, it is also a significant intervention in the local bus market with the potential to have serious impacts on services both within the franchising area, as well as in neighbouring authorities. Due to these risks, I have no plans to modify the franchising process. This model provides for rigorous scrutiny of local transport authority franchising proposals to safeguard the protection of passengers and the wider bus network from potential damage of a poorly developed franchise.

I hope this helps to clarify the present position.

Yours sincerely,

**JIM FAIRLIE**