

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

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

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.