

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

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

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.