

PE2116/L: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers

Nestrans written submission, 24 January 2025

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
- 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.