

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

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

### **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.