



Response from Bus Users to the Greater Manchester Bus Consultation January 2020

The Strategic Case sets out the challenges facing the local bus market and says that it is not performing as well as it could. Do you have any comments on this?

Bus patronage is in decline and the withdrawal of operators has not helped that situation. This is happening across the country, however, and is not specific to Manchester so in itself, it does not make the case for franchising. In fact, in areas such as the West Midlands and Sheffield where there are no franchising schemes, there has been a rise in bus patronage.

Disappointingly, the Greater Manchester scheme includes no aim to increase passenger or journey numbers and, in fact, specifically states that this will not be addressed by the project. This seems a wasted opportunity which would not justify the enormous expenditure that has been incurred to date and is planned to continue.

The Strategic Case says that reforming the bus market is the right thing to do to address the challenges facing the local bus market. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this? Why do you say this?

The challenges facing the local bus market, as elsewhere in the country, seem largely to be as a result of traffic congestion and a lack of priority and infrastructure for buses and bus passengers. The proposals do not address these issues in any way, other than providing bus depots, but refer to 'other initiatives' which are not spelled out. Without these problems tackled head on, no new scheme will make bus travel more efficient or attractive, nor will it make interchanges between different modes of travel simpler, and the whole network more accessible.

There are a number of suppositions and suggestions underpinning the proposals which have not been challenged, some of which are below:

Only a franchising scheme can provide multi-operator ticketing. This is untrue. The recent strategy document of the operator group, CPT, promises contactless, multi-operator, price-capped ticketing by 2022 in all urban areas, which would bring this in far more quickly than the proposal suggests would be the case for a franchising scheme. Indeed, there are already multi-operator tickets available within the Greater Manchester area, although these are not as convenient as they could become.

Franchising would remove the profit from private operators. This is also untrue. No private bus operator will bid for a contract under any scheme if there is no profit margin. The only way to have a profit-free network would be to introduce a municipal bus company, an option which is no longer available in England, following the Bus Services Act 2017.

Fares would be more affordable under a franchising scheme. The proposal suggests that fare prices would rise by the rate of inflation plus 1.4% per annum. Given that the Government's projected rate of inflation is around 3% for the next couple of years, that would result in substantial rises in fares across the network. This RPI increase would likely be reflected in price rises by private operators if no scheme was introduced, but history suggests that fare rises are carefully managed by bus operators to avoid losing ridership. In London - the model that most franchise supporters look to as exemplary - bus fare prices have been frozen for several years to keep people riding, and yet the network still has a major deficit which is borne by the local taxpayer.

There is scant attention paid to the environmental/air quality implications of the plan. Without the kinds of initiatives planned by York and Bristol, or an Ultra-Low Emission Zone or Congestion Charging aimed at removing or reducing private cars from the centre(s), substantial modal shift from cars to public transport will not be feasible in the short or medium term.

In addition, investment in vehicles to keep the fleet green will be substantial and ongoing and this is glossed over in the plan. Again, CPT members have already committed to buy only ultra-low and zero emission buses from 2025 and the scheme adopted in Greater Manchester would need to set aside funds to do the same. As each vehicle costs around £300k, this is no small commitment.

There are allusions to a Phase 2 which would address some of these issues, but there is no timescale for this, nor is there any mention of budget being set aside. The franchises will not be fully operational until 2024 assuming, of course, that everything goes completely to plan, on time, and on budget. There will be two opportunities for the public to voice their views in mayoral elections in that time, so there is a risk that the vision of the current Mayor could be overturned before the scheme fully comes to fruition. If an Enhanced Partnership were to be chosen, there would be 2-3 years of planned improvements to show for a much lower investment.

The Economic Case concludes that the Proposed Franchising Scheme provides the best value for money compared to the partnership options because it would:

- offer a 'high' ratio of benefit to the cost to GMCA, one which is broadly comparable with the partnership options,
- provide the most economic value (Net Present Value), and
- create the best platform from which further economic value could be delivered.

Do you have any comments on this?

The economic case is not comprehensible for the average reader. The economic case as provided is using a basis which, while accepted by economists and academics, is not intuitive or 'real world' and is therefore unhelpful for the purpose of consultation with the public.

What is clear is that there would be substantial costs associated with developing this scheme and the outcomes would provide limited benefits. Given that local government has had enormous cuts in income over the past decade, a large increase in expenditure for no apparent increase in passenger numbers seems imprudent.

There is also no exit plan outlined as to what will happen if the proposed scheme is not successful, nor is there any suggestion of how routes will be procured if bids are not forthcoming on sections of the network. There is therefore a risk that more funds would be required to subsidise more services, which is not included in the economic cases.

Clearly a lot of new jobs would be created within the local authority which could have some benefit to the city, but it is likely that many of those would be filled by people currently working for private operators so there may be a much smaller net benefit. Their futures would also need to be considered in any exit plan.

The Financial Case concludes that GMCA could afford to introduce and operate the Proposed Franchising Scheme. After completing the Assessment and in advance of this consultation, GMCA has proposed how it would fund the introduction of a fully franchised system. Do you have any comments on these matters?

There is a suggestion in the proposal that a one-off tax may need to be levied to introduce the scheme. However, there seems to be no mention that this is likely to be ongoing, which seems disingenuous. The amount of reinvestment required on an ongoing basis to keep vehicles and maintenance skills up-to-date will easily swallow up any surplus made, as London's experience can show, and a London-style precept for taxpayers to keep buses running may not be popular.

Just because a plan can be developed to make the scheme affordable does not mean it should go ahead when there are viable and prudent alternatives which would provide the same benefits without the same strain on the public purse and the unnecessary risk involved.

Taking everything into account, the Assessment concludes that the Proposed Franchising Scheme is the best way to achieve GMCA's objectives to improve bus services. Do you have any comments on this?

The Assessment seems to have started with the aim of finding the benefits of the franchise proposal rather than being a forensic analysis of each option (and any others operating elsewhere).

The timeline to implementation of a franchising scheme seems excessively long, in comparison to other options.

The scheme is intended to be introduced in phases across the network over a period of many years. This seems set to cause immense confusion and disruption to the travelling public, as they attempt to understand whether their new, multi-operator ticket covers their whole journey, or if they need several to complete their planned journeys.

Looking at Enhanced Partnership Schemes elsewhere, it would appear that all the required benefits could be achieved by that model without the same risks, and still allowing for local authority control of the network. It would also allow for the aim of increasing bus ridership to be included and addressed strategically.

The 'Ambitious Partnership' outlined in this proposal does not seem ambitious at all, in our view. We would recommend to you the model developed in the West Midlands, which has similar aims over a wide area with different authorities needing to work together. This model allows all the issues which could cause friction to be discussed and agreed before the Scheme is published. It also ensures that passenger concerns are part of the planning process, rather than an afterthought.

A far more ambitious Enhanced Partnership Scheme could be up and running within 18 months in Greater Manchester, as most of the discussions have already been held. The benefits that could accrue from such a scheme would allow the funds set aside for franchising to be used to subsidise additional services and infrastructure to make buses the fastest, cleanest and most accessible way of travelling around Greater Manchester.

We were particularly concerned to note that accessibility issues do not seem to have taken any central role in the scheme. Buses are of critical importance to many people with disabilities and to those with limited means. The scheme could include measures to support travel training, companion passes, free travel for apprentices and a host of other options which would make the bus a real option for many people who are currently experiencing barriers to travel.

To what extent do you support or oppose the introduction of the Proposed Franchising Scheme? Why do you say this?

Our aim is to see the best outcomes for passengers - the people we represent. This is the first time their views have been given an opportunity to be put forward, but the process has a flavour of being a *fait accompli*.

We applaud any consultation process, but we would prefer a consultation at a much earlier stage in the planning before the preferred option has already been approved by the various authorities and a budget set. By consulting at this late stage, it feels rather like a tick-box exercise which can have no real impact.

The proposed franchised scheme should produce some limited benefits for passengers but these could have been so much greater if meaningful consultation had been done at an earlier stage. Focusing on unified branding but not on customer service, does seem to be targeting the wrong outcomes.

We know that passengers want frequency, reliability, punctuality, affordability, accessibility, ease of information and ticketing, and excellent customer service. These schemes will not provide many of these as the focus simply does not appear to be on the needs of passengers.

Are there any changes that you think would improve the Proposed Franchising Scheme? Please provide further details as to the changes you think would improve the Proposed Franchising Scheme.

A detailed passenger and potential passenger consultation to identify the specific needs of local people.

Ongoing involvement of passenger representatives.

A detailed plan for how the congestion and air quality issues are to be addressed

A detailed plan for increasing public transport numbers and reducing private car use in urban centres across the GM region.

If you oppose the introduction of the Proposed Franchising Scheme, how likely would you be to support it if the changes you suggested in answer to the previous question were made?

Bus Users simply wants the best services possible, based on what passengers tell us. Passengers generally neither know nor care what the ownership and control structures are, as long as they get the services they need. We would support a scheme that provides a rounded picture of improvement for all those who need or want to use a bus.

Finally, do you have any other comments you want to make?

We have said, from the outset, that we would welcome the chance to use our knowledge and understanding of bus passengers, to make this the best possible scheme for the people of Greater Manchester.

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