Bus Users UK response to the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority Bus Franchising Consultation

Franchising scheme

Geographic scope

Bus Users UK supports the proposed region-wide approach, including the commitment to maintain the overall size of the network over the coming years. Passengers do not travel according to boundaries and a consistent approach across Tyne and Wear, County Durham and Northumberland is likely to support a more integrated experience. We particularly welcome recognition of cross-boundary journeys and encourage continued engagement with neighbouring authorities to minimise disruption and maintain connectivity for passengers travelling across authority boundaries.

Proposed timescale

We recognise the scale and complexity of implementing franchising and support a phased approach if this helps minimise disruption to passengers. During the transition period, clear and consistent communication with passengers will be essential to maintain confidence in the network and ensure passengers understand how services, fares and information channels may change over time.

Strategic case

What works well and what could be improved

Many bus services in the North East provide essential access to socially necessary services across the region. Particular consideration should be given to rural and coastal communities, older passengers, disabled passengers, young people and those without access to a private car.

Through our engagement with passengers throughout England, issues commonly raised include:

- complexity of fares and ticketing
- inconsistent information provision
- concerns regarding reliability and punctuality
- variations in customer experience between operators
- difficulties understanding who to contact when problems arise
- concerns about service reductions and changes
- concerns regarding safety and security

Improvements that simplify the customer experience and strengthen accountability are likely to be welcomed by many passengers.

Challenges identified

We broadly agree that the challenges identified reflect many of the concerns raised by passengers.

In particular we support the focus on:

- consistency of information and customer experience
- accountability to communities
- safety and security
- accessibility and inclusion
- reliability and punctuality

We welcome the recognition that passenger experience should be central to future network development.

Strategic objectives

We are supportive of the strategic objectives overall and particularly welcome those relating to:

- accessibility and inclusion
- passenger safety
- integrated information
- affordable and understandable fares
- reliability
- community influence

We would encourage the MSA to ensure that customer experience and passenger satisfaction are measured formally as part of the future performance framework.

Strategic conclusion

We recognise the conclusion that franchising is better placed to deliver the identified objectives. From a passenger perspective, we can see potential benefits in greater network integration, simplified ticketing, clearer accountability and stronger opportunities for passenger influence.

However, successful delivery will depend on passenger needs remaining central throughout implementation and operation.

Economic case

The impacts

We welcome the assessment's focus on passenger outcomes including affordability, access to services, information provision, journey quality, safety and wider social inclusion. These are all key issues for passengers.

Commercial case

Objectives

We welcome the objective of increasing public influence over outcomes for passengers and ensuring that transition arrangements minimise disruption to bus users. We also support recognition of the

importance of maintaining opportunities for smaller operators where this can contribute to network resilience and local connectivity.

Small and medium operators

We recognise the important role that small and medium-sized operators play, particularly in rural and less densely populated areas. Efforts to ensure these operators continue to have opportunities to participate under any future franchising arrangements are welcome where this supports passenger outcomes and network coverage.

Conclusion

We support the conclusion that franchising may provide greater opportunities to improve consistency, accountability and integration from a passenger perspective, and would encourage the MSA to continue evaluating success against passenger-focused measures as implementation progresses.

Management case

Delivery arrangements

A key consideration for Bus Users UK is whether sufficient capability exists to deliver a high-quality customer experience.

We welcome the proposed focus on customer information, customer experience and performance management. We would encourage the MSA to ensure that adequate resources are dedicated to passenger engagement, complaints handling, customer insight and accessibility from the outset.

Monitoring and evaluation

We welcome the proposed performance management framework and would encourage the MSA to include:

- passenger satisfaction measures
- customer experience indicators
- accessibility outcomes
- complaints analysis
- passenger perception of safety

Alongside operational measures such as punctuality and reliability, these indicators will help demonstrate whether franchising is genuinely improving outcomes for passengers.

Governance arrangements

We welcome the emphasis placed on engagement and consultation within the proposed arrangements.

We would encourage the MSA to establish ongoing mechanisms for passenger engagement, ensuring that passenger voices continue to inform strategic and operational decisions after implementation and not solely during periods of formal consultation.

Conclusion

We agree that whichever model is adopted, effective delivery will require strong governance, meaningful engagement and a continued focus on passenger outcomes. The success of franchising should ultimately be judged by the extent to which it improves the experience of bus users across the North East.

Equality, accessibility & inclusion

We welcome the Equality Impact Assessment and its recognition that many groups with protected characteristics rely heavily on bus services.

We particularly welcome the focus on:

- disabled passengers
- older people
- women and girls
- young people
- lower-income communities

We encourage continued engagement with representative organisations and passengers themselves to ensure accessibility, safety and inclusion remain embedded throughout implementation and future network development.

Final questions

Do you support the introduction of the proposed bus franchising scheme?

Bus Users UK supports the ambition to create a more integrated, accountable and passenger-focused bus network.

Many elements of the proposed franchising model have the potential to deliver positive outcomes for passengers, including simplified fares, clearer information, stronger passenger influence, improved accountability and enhanced safety measures.

However, our support is rooted in the expectation that passenger needs remain central to decision-making throughout implementation and operation. The success of any future model should ultimately be measured by improvements in passenger experience, accessibility, reliability and confidence in the network.

Are there any changes you think would improve the proposed franchising scheme?

We would encourage:

- formal ongoing passenger engagement mechanisms such as passenger advisory panels, community engagement forums and structured engagement with representative organisations
- publication of customer experience performance measures
- clear complaints handling standards including customer service standards; response times for enquiries and complaints; and escalation processes, such as the role Bus Users UK plays as the only approved Alternative Dispute Resolution body for bus and coach services

- transparent reporting of passenger satisfaction
- continued focus on accessible and non-digital information channels
- strong monitoring of accessibility and inclusion outcomes

We also strongly support the proposed creation of:

- a single source of journey information
- consistent disruption communications
- centralised customer support
- simplified complaints handling arrangements

The MSA must ensure that information remains accessible to passengers who are digitally excluded. While investment in digital channels is welcome, printed information, telephone support and accessible communication formats remain essential for many passengers.

Further comments

Bus Users UK recognises that the current bus network faces well-documented challenges, including the long-term decline in patronage, reductions in network coverage, inconsistencies in information and ticketing, concerns around reliability and punctuality, and limited opportunities for passengers and communities to influence service design.

We support the ambition to create a more integrated transport network that provides greater accountability to passengers and communities. Many of the proposed outcomes associated with franchising align closely with issues regularly raised by bus users through our engagement, complaints handling and advocacy activity.

However, we believe the long-term success of any franchising scheme will depend not only on structural reform, but also on the extent to which passenger perspectives remain embedded in decision-making throughout implementation and operation.

We look forward to continuing to work with the MSA and wider stakeholders to ensure passengers remain at the heart of future bus service delivery in the North East.

About Bus Users UK

Bus Users 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 a 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.

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