

Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee on petition PE2246: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers, lodged by Ellie Harrison on behalf of the Better Buses National Coalition

Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

Bus service provision: Buses are the most popular form of public transport in Scotland, carrying 334 million passengers in 2024-25, around four times as many passengers as ScotRail trains. However, neither the Scottish Government nor councils have any direct role in the provision of the vast majority of Scotland's scheduled local bus and inter-city coach services. These are largely provided by private sector operators on a commercial basis. The main exception is Lothian Buses - which is local authority owned but operates on a purely commercial basis at arms-length from its owners. Fares, routes, and timetables for commercially operated services are decided by the operator.

Local authorities can offer a subsidy for the operation of socially necessary services which cannot be provided on a commercial basis, with support typically awarded after a competitive tendering exercise.

Bus franchising: Local Service Franchising is a system of bus regulation, underpinned by the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, that allows a local transport authority to specify bus routes, timetables, and services standards within a designated area. Local service franchising can only come into effect once a local transport authority has developed an overarching franchising framework and then entered into franchise agreements with bus operators.

A franchising framework must specify:

- The area that it covers.
- The bus services to be provided.
- The period it will be in operation.
- Service standards to be provided under franchise agreements.

The franchising framework is implemented through franchise agreements, which are agreements between the local transport authority and local bus service operators under which:

- the local transport authority grants an operator the exclusive right to provide the services to which the agreement relates, which can include payment by the authority to the operator.

- that operator undertakes to provide those services on such terms as may be specified in the agreement.

The process to be followed by a local transport authority wishing to make a franchising framework can be summarised as follows:

- prepare a proposed framework.
- prepare an assessment of the proposed framework.
- obtain a report from an independent auditor on the financial implications of the proposed framework.
- consult on the proposed framework.
- if necessary, modify the proposed framework and, where the modifications materially affect an aspect of the assessment, go through the process of assessment and audit again; and
- obtain approval to make the proposed framework from a panel convened by the Traffic Commissioner [a UK Government appointed official responsible for bus operator licensing] for that purpose.

To date, Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT - the Regional Transport Partnership for the Greater Glasgow area) has led the way in developing initial proposals for the creation of a franchising scheme, as set out in the [Strathclyde Regional Bus Strategy](#).

The franchising framework development and approval process has been discussed at recent Transport Committee meetings. Bruce Kiloh, head of policy and planning at SPT, told the Transport Committee at its [meeting of 23 September 2026](#) that “From the word go on the development on the 2019 act, we said that a decision on the future of the bus network in the west of Scotland being made by a three-person panel that was picked by the traffic commissioner did not sit well with us...Our view is that the panel should be removed from the process and we should allow the democratically accountable structures that are in place, such as SPT, to make the decisions.”

Stephen Flynn MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport, told the Transport Committee [on 9 September 2026](#) that:

“...several representations have been made to me in good faith, by members of the committee as well as by campaign groups, about the panel that exists as part of the franchising process, which was put in place through previous legislation. I am listening carefully to those arguments. We need to recognise that the process was put in place for a reason, which was to provide certainty for the viability of services going forward. However, I also recognise that the panel is considered to be an additional barrier by many who want change. I am certainly giving those arguments active consideration, as I should.”

The Scottish Government's [written evidence to the Petitions Committee](#), dated 22 September 2026, includes two bullet points related to the franchising framework process and the role of the panel, stating:

- “It is possible to amend the Act to remove the panel requirement. These amendments would need changes to primary legislation which would take time to deliver as the panel process is fundamental to the current franchising process, if this is removed, there may be a need to revisit the entire approach to franchising.
- We are committed to carrying out further consideration of the panel process with stakeholders.”

Financial support for bus franchising: The Scottish Government has [confirmed in a written answer](#) published on 3 September 2026 that “...we are committed to investing £4 million in 2026-27 to support Local Transport Authorities to build business cases for local bus improvement through franchising.” SPT [estimates that it may cost it up £15 million](#) to bring franchising proposals to the point of implementation.

Key Organisations and relevant links

- [Confederation of Passenger Transport](#): Bus industry representative body.
- [Bus Users Scotland](#): Bus passenger representative body.
- [Scottish Collaboration of Transportation Specialists](#): Organisation representing senior local authority transport officers.
- [Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers](#): Organisation representing local authority officers involved in public transport.
- [Traffic Commissioner for Scotland](#): UK Government appointed Commissioner responsible for bus operator and driver licensing, with a specific role in the bus franchising process.

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9 October 2026

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

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