PE2246/B: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers

Petitioner written submission, 29 October 2026

Campaign background

This petition is the continuation of a campaign begun at the Scottish Parliament in August 2024 to accelerate the implementation of the severely delayed bus franchising powers in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019. We wrote and submitted four pieces of evidence to support our first petition as part of this campaign, which we urge the Committee to review:

- PE2116/B: Petitioner written submission, 11 October 2024
- PE2116/C: Petitioner written submission, 12 November 2024
- PE2116/R: Petitioner written submission, 15 September 2025
- PE2116/S: Petitioner written submission, 15 September 2025

A summary of each of these written submissions, along with key updates since, was published in evidence submitted to the Transport Committee (see p.9-11) ahead of their meeting on 'Scotland's bus services' on 2 September 2026.

Our first petition was considered by the former Citizen Participation & Public Petitions Committee on 27 November 2024 and 24 September 2025, and was only closed because of the Committee's lack of "capacity and time to further pursue the complex question of funding in this parliamentary session" and because of the unwillingness of the then Transport Minister, Jim Fairlie MSP, "to modify the current franchising process".

Since then, Transport Scotland has finally published the statutory guidance required by local transport authorities to progress bus franchising on 17 March 2026 (more than 6 years after the 2019 Act was given Royal Assent), which fulfilled the first of our campaign's three demands. We also now have a new Government and a new Transport Secretary, Stephen Flynn MSP, who announced on 17 June 2026 his intention to develop new 'Better Buses legislation' during this parliamentary session.

We re-launched this petition in August 2026 to influence the content of the new 'Better Buses legislation' and ensure that our two remaining demands are fulfilled:

1. That the 2019 Act is urgently amended to remove the unnecessary 'independent panel' part of the bus franchising approval process, which hands undue power over Scotland's bus services to the Traffic Commissioner – an unelected official appointed by the UK Government. The panel will add up to a year to the timescales for implementing bus franchising, as well as additional costs and significant risks that proposals could be rejected. The Parliament's former Net Zero Energy & Transport

Committee received compelling evidence explaining why the panel must be removed in October 2024. We have drafted the necessary amendments to bring the Scottish legislation in line with England's tried-and-tested Bus Services Act 2017.

2. That all Scotland's Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs) are empowered and supported to deliver bus franchising across their regions (currently only SPT, ZetTrans and SWestrans can).

Clear Leadership at last

John Swinney's announcement at the SNP Conference on 17 October 2026, that "by the end of this parliament, through franchising and regulation, the SNP will bring the bus network back into public control" – adds significant urgency to the demands of this petition. It will be impossible for the Scottish Government to deliver on this pledge before the next election in 2031 without acting on them.

Having done next-to-nothing to support the delivery of bus franchising in the 7 years since the 2019 Act was passed, the Scottish Government now says it wants to roll it out nationwide in just 5 years. We are, of course, delighted with this renewed focus and clear political leadership on bus franchising. We believe that it is only possible to successfully deliver this policy by utilising the existing RTP structure set out in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2005.

National Standards, Regional Delivery

So far, only one RTP – Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT) – has made the decision to take forward bus franchising, as a result of significant public pressure. However, SPT's most recent timeline shows that (without changes to the legislation) it will be 2031 before the franchising roll-out can even begin in Strathclyde. It is therefore vital that the Scottish Government works quickly to amend the legislation to remove the independent panel part of the bus franchising process. Provided this is done before the end of 2028 (whilst SPT is still completing its Franchising Framework & Assessment (FFA)), it will cut one year from the timeline. Whilst making these quick amendments to the legislation, the Scottish Government should also consider SPT's other recommendations set out in their letter to Stephen Flynn on 19 June 2026.

SPT's work developing bus franchising should then be used to create a blueprint for the other six RTPs to follow (just as Greater Manchester has done in England, with many other English city-regions now following its lead to deliver bus franchising). To that end, the £4 million committed in the 2026-27 budget "to support local transport authorities to build business cases for local bus improvements through franchising" – should all be allocated to SPT to help accelerate their work on the FFA (SPT's most recent projections estimate they require £6-6.5million to complete this).

Alongside this, new funding must be made available to support the six other RTPs to build the capacity necessary to take forward bus franchising in their respective regions. This will require all the RTPs to become 'Model 3' and be designated as the 'local transport authorities' for their regions. This will involve the individual local

authorities in the RTP areas transferring their resources, staff and responsibilities for transport to their region's RTP, as well as all powers and funding for bus services being devolved down from (the soon to be dissolved) Transport Scotland to the RTP level. This should be done with cognisance of the parallel local governance reforms so that regional governance structures/boundaries for all key services (transport, health, education etc.) are aligned. Once all RTPs are empowered (hopefully by the start of 2028), they can begin work on their respective FFAs (a process that takes two years). These six FFAs should be developed in parallel with support from the Scottish Government so knowledge/expertise can be shared and cross-boundary journeys accounted for.

Please view our timeline graphic showing the urgent action needed to successfully deliver the Government's pledge to bring Scotland's "bus network back into public control" by 2031.