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DRAFT

Transport Committee

Comataidh na Còmhhdhail

Wednesday 2 September 2026

Session 7



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TRANSPORT COMMITTEE **3rd Meeting 2026, Session 7**

CONVENER

*Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Iris Duane (Glasgow) (Green)

*Zen Ghani (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)

*Donald MacKinnon (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)

*Graham Simpson (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)

*Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Chris Day (Edinburgh Bus Users Group)

Colin Howden (Transform Scotland)

Ellie Harrison (Get Glasgow Moving)

Greig Mackay (Bus Users UK)

LOCATION

The Alexander Fleming Room (CR3)

Scottish Parliament

Transport Committee

Wednesday 2 September 2026

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Bus Services

The Convener (Willie Rennie): Good morning, and welcome to the third meeting of the Transport Committee in 2026. We have received no apologies this morning.

The first item on our agenda is an evidence session on Scotland's bus services. I welcome our witnesses: Chris Day, secretary, Edinburgh Bus Users Group; Ellie Harrison, co-founder and chair, Get Glasgow Moving; Colin Howden, director, Transform Scotland; and Greig Mackay, director for Scotland, Bus Users UK. Thank you for the helpful submissions that we have received, which are included in members' papers.

I ask members to try to keep questions as concise as possible, and I ask the witnesses to follow suit with their answers. We will try to conclude this session in about an hour and a half, although we have a bit of flexibility on that. We will try to cover all the areas that everyone wants to cover.

We will start with questions from Iris Duane.

Iris Duane (Glasgow) (Green): I echo the convener's thanks for the written submissions.

Buses are a key part of our transport network and a lot of attention has been focused on them recently, with the new Scottish Government touting its better buses bill, although the details of what that would contain are sparse. I ask our witnesses to talk us through what they think the priorities should be for the Government in that legislation.

Ellie Harrison (Get Glasgow Moving): Thank you for inviting me to speak on behalf of Get Glasgow Moving and the better buses for Strathclyde campaign, which covers the whole Strathclyde region—I will be speaking very much from our region's perspective.

We now have a clear plan to sort out public transport in the Strathclyde region, through the Strathclyde regional bus strategy, which was approved by SPT in September last year. That includes taking the bus network back into public control through bus franchising. Now that that has been agreed, we are up against the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, which is the legislation that SPT has to follow. It is incredibly complicated, and we are looking at another five years before bus

franchising is implemented in Strathclyde. I have already been involved in this campaign for 10 years, so the thought of another five is pretty daunting. People are very frustrated at the situation regarding bus services across our region, which is, of course, a dense urban area with a huge suburban and rural area.

Our priority for the new legislation is that it should help to speed up the bus franchising process. The Scottish Parliament information centre paper that was published ahead of this committee meeting was useful in that it highlighted the unfortunately really bad legislation that the Parliament has passed over the past 20 years in terms of bus regulation. None of the powers that have been available have been used before the point that we are at now, when SPT is saying that it will use bus franchising. We need to smooth that process for SPT, because Scotland is being left really far behind England and Wales, which are ploughing ahead with that approach at great pace.

Our bus franchising legislation is the most complex in the United Kingdom. There is an additional step that requires bus franchising proposals to be approved by an independent panel, which is convened by a traffic commissioner—an unelected official appointed by the UK Government. The Scottish Government decided to give power away to an unelected official who has the final say over whether bus franchising can go ahead.

We need to scrap that part of the process. It was part of English legislation until the Bus Services Act 2017, which removed the panel stage. In 2015, franchising was tried in the Newcastle area, but the panel rejected the proposals and lots of public money was wasted, so the UK Government removed that stage from the process. However, in Scotland, in addition to an independent audit, which provides enough checks and balances for SPT to check that all the figures are right, we have added the panel stage. Therefore, getting rid of that stage is our number 1 ask for the new legislation.

Scotland has never had a bus services bill. It has always had massive transport acts that are incredibly unwieldy. The most recent one included provisions on all sorts of stuff, including low-emission zones, workplace parking levies, pavement parking and canals. That is why the sections on bus services did not get the scrutiny that they needed, so the provisions on the panel stage were allowed to slip through without the proper scrutiny that they deserved.

We want a streamlined bus services bill, with none of the other stuff included, to be progressed as quickly as possible, in parallel with SPT's important work, so that the bill can complement

what it is doing. The last thing that we would want is for SPT's work on progressing bus franchising to be delayed even further, because it has already been nearly seven years since the most recent transport bill was passed, and we still have not seen a franchised bus on Scotland's streets. We need to do all that we can in this parliamentary session to speed up the process.

Greig Mackay (Bus Users UK): Thank you very much for the opportunity to be part of this evidence session.

The priority for Scotland must be improving journey speeds and bus reliability. To do that, the legislation must provide for multiyear funding to allow the various partnerships in Scotland to work together to implement bus priority measures that lead to tangible benefits for bus passengers. The benefits should not be felt only in urban areas. Feeder services from rural areas and the coach services that operate between the various cities should also benefit from bus priority measures.

We should give passengers back the confidence that, when they go for a bus, the journey will be reliable and the bus will get them to where they are going in the time that it is meant to take. Right now, the congestion and roadworks that are prevalent across Scotland are having a negative impact on journey speeds, which is a major barrier to people choosing to travel by bus.

The £2 flat fare policy that was announced yesterday will provide a welcome affordability benefit for all passengers. However, we wonder about the long-term sustainability of funding for the policy. Is that the best way to spend money on bus services? Could we look at other options? For example, a lot of local authorities have had to cut their transport budgets, because those are not protected and there is no legal statute that states that they must provide essential bus services.

Those are our key priorities.

Colin Howden (Transform Scotland): I agree with much of what Greig Mackay has said. In our written submission, we lead evidence that has been proposed by public, private and third sector organisations over many years. They conclude that a similar set of factors leads to a decline in bus services.

We flag work by KPMG for CPT Scotland, which isolated the growth of car ownership as the largest determinant of a decline in bus services. There have also been changes in the patterns of where people work and an increase in home shopping. Transport Focus, which has looked at passenger surveys over the past few decades, flags issues with punctuality and reliability—whether a bus turns up and whether it does so on time. Through its Scottish household survey, the Scottish

Government highlights car ownership and journey times as determining factors. In our work at Transform Scotland, which we published in March last year, we cited similar factors for why people do not take the bus.

We also have messages on affordability and fares, which we will probably come back to later.

Chris Day (Edinburgh Bus Users Group): I am not quite sure what the possible better buses legislation is about. It is a bit of a new one and seems to be quite nebulous. In Edinburgh, Lothian Buses accounts for around 36 per cent of all bus trips in Scotland. On its own, it accounts for more trips than the entire ScotRail network. My comments will inevitably be focused on Edinburgh and the wider Lothians region—and perhaps Fife—because our point of view is that, broadly speaking, the current system works in Edinburgh, so we are very reluctant to see that apple cart being upset.

In the manifesto that we circulated to political parties before the Holyrood election, we suggested that they consider introducing a bus service standard guarantee and bus stop guarantee for passengers. I am aware of the difficulties that are posed by targets. Quite often, when you have a bureaucracy and set it targets, everything is geared towards meeting them rather than providing a good service. Nevertheless, it seems that unlike in, for example, health or education, bus users, whether they are in a rural or urban area, have no guarantees or targets for what they can reasonably expect.

There is a case for a framework, which would be different in different parts of Scotland. That would mean that a typical Scottish resident in a rural area could expect a bus at least every two hours within X metres, or in a very big area, X miles. That would apply to bus stops and services. It is quite difficult to work out reasonable expectations for bus users. I suspect that it would take a lot of work but, if a national framework provided for that, that would help.

My message is to leave Edinburgh as it is—it is fine. I do not mind whatever you want to do in other parts of Scotland. The bus industry is very localised, so I am hesitant about making national prescriptions for Scotland. Nevertheless, there is a lot of commonality.

The Convener: Do you have any follow-up questions, Iris?

Iris Duane: No. That was helpful. I am happy to move on.

The Convener: You all got your main messages across, but it would be helpful if we could have answers that are a little shorter from now on.

Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP): Those answers were useful, but I want to home in on some of the rural aspects, because the conversation about buses tends to skew towards cities and urban regions. I understand why, but my rural constituents would not allow me to let that happen.

I will start with Greig Mackay. Are there particular steps that you feel that the Government should implement as part of the buses bill that could make things better in rural areas? We have talked about bus priority measures. For instance, a bus from Dundee to Kirriemuir takes an hour. What measures should the Government bring forward to speed that up and improve reliability?

09:45

Greig Mackay: Any town or city can implement bus priority measures, but the big thing is that they must be enforced—otherwise, people will just park in those places and delivery vans will use them. As well as being enforced, they must apply at times during which most buses operate. To take the example that you highlighted, if buses do not run 24 hours a day, you do not need 24-hour priority. Instead, you might need priority from 7 am to 7 pm, seven days a week. That would cover the bulk of bus journeys and have the maximum impact on their reliability.

On the question of the biggest issue for rural passengers, ultimately, it comes back to secured funding for local authorities to provide—and have a legislative requirement to provide—local bus services that are supported. A lot of services that are not purely rural but are on the fringes of, for example, SPT's network will never be commercially viable and will have to be supported. However, having the funding and a statutory obligation for local authorities to provide those services would mean that people in your constituency would have access to a bus service and a minimum standard, as Chris Day highlighted. In that way, whether it is an hourly service or whatever, a minimum requirement would be placed on local authorities. At the moment, they have an obligation to look at providing those services, but they do not actually have to provide them—that is the big difference.

Colin Howden: Greig Mackay has talked about bus priority measures and where those help people to access towns and rural areas, and Chris Day and Greig have talked about minimum connectivity standards. We endorse both those points, and I have four extra points to make briefly.

First, we think that you should establish a rural and islands mobility plan. That is not our idea; it was brought forward by the Scottish Rural and Islands Transport Community during the previous

session of Parliament. We endorse that—we should have a national framework—because transport in rural areas is different from transport in urban areas, which is what a lot of the discussion about buses refers to.

Greig has talked about stable multiyear funding. We need to think about this as a public service rather than as commercial services. Some of the services will not be commercial, and you will need to deliver them differently.

You need to think about this as a mixed modality service. Some of it will be scheduled services—where there is sufficient load to have scheduled bus services—but some of it will have to be community transport; shared transport such as car sharing and lift sharing; school bus services, taxis and private hire vehicles; integration with provision for walking and cycling for shorter journeys; and connections with rail and ferry services. We need to think not just about scheduled bus services but the wider mix of community and other public transport services.

Finally, I go back to a point made by the Scottish Rural and Islands Transport Community and Scottish Rural Action, who would argue strongly that you need to put communities at the centre of planning those networks so that they fit the requirements of those areas. Again, I endorse that position.

Lloyd Melville: Part of the point that I was trying to get to on bus priority measures is that, for example, the route that I mentioned between Dundee and Kirriemuir serves a lot of very small communities and covers a large rural expanse. Those roads might not always be suited to bus priority measures. Are specific additional actions required on top of the measures in urban areas, or does it come back to the points that you just made?

Greig Mackay: There must also be a parking plan, which can include removing parking provision from some roads. As you said, space is limited on some roads, and difficult decisions must be made. It might be necessary to remove some parking provision to allow for bus priority, which would be enforced during particular times, as I said. If a bus carries 50 or 60 people and there are four buses an hour, that represents a significant number of people every day passing through that corridor who would benefit from that priority measure. We need to change the rhetoric in relation to car ownership, particularly in urban areas. For example, you do not necessarily have a right to park outside your house on busy roads.

We want active travel and safe walking spaces, but we also want a bus priority measure, as that will affect vast numbers of people, as Colin

Howden highlighted. They are the ones who would benefit from such a measure.

Colin Howden: Where I stay in East Lothian, there is an excellent rail service into town. East Coast Buses does the best that it can in providing bus services across East Lothian, and it generally does an excellent job, but its services fall down once they hit the Edinburgh border. They have to slow down, because of a lack of or poor enforcement of bus priority. That just illustrates how a rural operator might be doing well, and then will be let down by the lack of bus priority when they access towns and cities.

Lloyd Melville: Reference was made to Scotland falling behind England and Wales. Are there measures specific to rural areas in English and Welsh legislation that could be applicable here?

Ellie Harrison: I live in Glasgow, but I work in Dundee, so I am quite familiar with your area, too; a lot of my students travel into Dundee to get to college. That said, I know the Strathclyde area best, and it is a huge area, with 12 local authorities, 2.2 million people, or 40 per cent of Scotland's population, and lots of towns, cities and rural areas that all need to be connected.

There are a couple of points that I want to make. First, with bus franchising, SPT has now committed to taking the bus network back into public control so that it can be planned and co-ordinated as a public service. One key benefit of that approach is the ability to cross-subsidise so that we no longer have the crazy situation that we have at the moment in which private operators run the busy commercial routes and take profit out of the system—profit that largely comes from public subsidy—while the local transport authorities try to fill in the gaps with subsidised services on very small budgets.

That system is fundamentally broken, and bus franchising will change things. In our case, private operators will still run the profitable routes but that will be on a set contract, which will mean that they will not be able to take money out of the system. When passengers get on to a bus, the money that they spend will go to the transport authority rather than to the private operator, and it can then be used to cross-subsidise the less busy routes or the routes that they currently subsidise. In other words, the money is kept in the system so that we can improve the network for everyone.

I agree with Chris Day about minimum standards. I missed the issue out of our submission, but it is essential, because we have a crazy situation at the moment in Scotland. Those who live in Edinburgh have a great bus service, while those in other parts of the country are really being left behind. We need to ensure that, in the

better buses legislation, we set out minimum standards that people all over the country can be guaranteed when it comes to bus services.

In that respect, I would look at what happened in Switzerland. In the 1980s, the Swiss set minimum standards in law, and they now have the best public transport systems in the world, because transport authorities are charged with delivering a certain level of service, no matter where that is. If you live in a tiny village, you are guaranteed in law a bus service once an hour, seven days a week from 6 am till midnight, and it is the job of the transport authorities to deliver that service.

Finally, the issue of transport governance has been rumbling on since 2019—

The Convener: We will come back to that.

Ellie Harrison: Okay, but we need a regional model so that urban and rural areas are connected and so that we can cross-subsidise to ensure that everybody gets a decent bus service.

The Convener: You wanted to come in on this, too, Chris.

Chris Day: I had not intended to say much on it, but the subject of bus priority and reaching the Edinburgh border came up. Edinburgh has some rural areas, but it is largely an urban area. I will admit to not understanding the nature of many rural services. There is the question of connecting one village with another, and, in rural life, I would guess that there is often the question of what happens when someone gets to the next major town. Lloyd Melville gave the example of Kirriemuir and Dundee; in fact, I have been to Kirriemuir. I understand his point about the issue with bus priority on some roads, but that becomes crucial at the urban boundaries. It is remarkable that, as transport minister, Sarah Boyack proposed putting bus lanes on motorways and, 20 years later, that has still not happened. We might ask: what is that about?

If the committee comes on to the issue of bus priority, I will spend all day talking about it—I will talk about it until the convener stops me.

The Convener: We will come on to that. Donald MacKinnon is next.

Donald MacKinnon (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I thank the witnesses for appearing before us and for their written submissions.

I will stick with the rural theme, but I want to pick up on the link between uptake of concessionary travel and the availability of bus services in different areas. The Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership pointed me in the direction of an interesting freedom of information request. It is from 2022-23, so it is a bit out of date, but it looks at the uptake of the young person's concessionary

bus pass across different local authority areas. I will pick out a few examples.

In the Comhairle nan Eilean Siar area, which is the area that I represent, only 48 per cent of the estimated eligible young people had taken up the pass. The figure for Highland was even lower, at 47 per cent. In Edinburgh, it was up at 93 per cent, perhaps unsurprisingly. Glasgow was sitting somewhere in the middle, with take-up of 67 per cent. That shows that there is a disparity in who takes advantage of concessionary travel, which is available to all under-22s. Obviously, the spend per young person in those areas corresponds to that. Those figures are even more stark, but I will not read them out just now.

I am interested in that relationship. We put a lot of emphasis on concessionary travel, but we face the problem, which I think was mentioned in Chris Day's submission, that subsidised travel is no use if there is no service. That seems obvious, but it is important to bear that in mind when it comes to bus policy, given that so much emphasis is put on concessionary travel. I would like to tack on to that the issue of the relationship between concessionary travel and the network support grant.

Perhaps I could come to Chris Day first, as he was the last to answer the previous question.

Chris Day: Yes, that is entirely right. As a group, we are not necessarily arguing for more concessionary fares, because of the points that you have made. Because of the way that the industry works or the nature of the service, people who have a poor bus service, in effect, get a lower spend on their travel through concessionary travel. In political terms, that is actually quite regressive. I will not provide detailed figures, because you obviously have them.

At the recent election, the media coverage and—you will perhaps know this better than I do—the political emphasis of the candidates or the parties when it came to buses was very much, “Oh, that’s about concessionary fares, isn’t it?”, and that was it.

I think that the balance is wrong. Obviously, I am not going to say that we should reduce the availability of concessionary fares. Frankly, I think that that would be suicide for any Government, and I do not think that it would be reasonable to take the benefits of concessionary fares away from people who have had them. However, looking forward to future spending, the issue is more about making sure that buses are available for people.

As I say, a bus pass is no bloody use if you do not have a bus service. I suspect that that is why the take-up is so low in your constituency, Mr

MacKinnon. People there just think, “What’s the point of me having a bus pass?”

10:00

Donald MacKinnon: Ellie Harrison, take-up in the Glasgow local authority area is at 67 per cent, and it is probably even lower in the wider Strathclyde area. Do you have any reflections on that?

Ellie Harrison: That relates to the point that Colin Howden made at the end of his submission about the fact that we need to review all the funding streams that are currently going into bus services. At the moment, the concessionary card scheme is an inefficient use of public money. The equations that determine what the private operators get for each passenger are in the SPiCe paper. It is probably one of the most inefficient ways of running a bus system.

I agree with Chris Day that the scheme is regressive, because, if you have a poor bus service, not only are you being left behind anyway, you are also not able to get the benefit of that public subsidy and the free bus pass, because there are no buses for you to use. We need to change that, and I think that having minimum standards in law would help.

The key work that SPT is embarking on in relation to the franchising framework will assess all the funding that is going into bus transport in the Strathclyde region at the moment. The aim of engaging in bus franchising is to reroute all those funding streams through the democratically accountable transport authority for that region, so that it becomes the body that is responsible for delivering services in that area.

When Jenny Gilruth was the transport secretary a few years ago, she promised to review all funding streams that were going into bus transport, and we have heard those promises several times. We welcome the announcement yesterday that Transport Scotland will be abolished. It has caused a lot of the delays during the nearly seven years that we have had the 2019 act.

The bus powers that Transport Scotland has need to be devolved to the regional transport partnerships, and all the funding for bus transport should go via those democratically accountable bodies that have councillors from all the relevant local authorities on their boards, and they should be the ones that are responsible for delivering public transport in those areas.

The Convener: We are slightly going off the topic of the question.

Donald MacKinnon: Colin Howden, as Ellie mentioned, you picked up on this issue in your

written submission. Could you talk about the other funding streams as well, in particular the network support grant?

Colin Howden: In our evidence, we note that the local authority areas that benefit least from the scheme for the under-22s are South Lanarkshire, Aberdeenshire, Moray, Orkney and the Western Isles, and that the areas that benefit most are Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Dundee, Midlothian and East Lothian. If, like me, you are an Aberdonian who lives in East Lothian and has an office in Edinburgh, you would benefit from the scheme, but such a person might not be who John Swinney is thinking of when he talks about poverty or child poverty. The impact of that measure is very varied across the country and may not be very well aligned with poverty issues, which is relevant if that is the intention of that policy intervention.

On your broader question about whether we should prioritise concessionary fares or network coverage and so forth, you have heard the evidence from the other witnesses, and I would tend to agree with their views on that topic.

Donald MacKinnon: We have talked about the difference between rural and urban areas, but are there also uptake discrepancies within urban areas?

Greig Mackay: Yes, there are. In fact, I think that McGill's Buses has highlighted that Inverclyde is one of the areas with a lower uptake. There have been variances in the uptake for a couple of reasons: the first is to do with how well schools got behind it and promoted it to get the kids to apply; some local authorities were better than others at ensuring that the kids got their cards and all that kind of stuff. You are right to ask what the point is of having a bus pass when there are no bus services.

The second reason is that, currently, a lot of services run at about 70 per cent concessions; some of the more rural areas, such as in South Lanarkshire, where I live, are as high as 95 per cent concessions. If we are already at 70 per cent concessions as an average, we are probably nearer to making public transport such as buses free at the point of use for everybody—we are a lot nearer to that than to anything else. Instead of a £2 flat fare, why do we not simply make buses free at point of use for everybody and consider other funding streams for buses, and, that way, encourage more people to use buses and remove that barrier altogether? When commercial services are running at 95 per cent concessions—when they rely so much on concession card payments—you leave no room for growth or investment and leave the company in quite a predicament, because there is no opportunity for it to grow and to develop that service any more.

We need to look at bus services from a wider perspective. I agree with the point on various funding streams, NSG plus and so on. The question is whether there is a better way of doing that, and making buses free at point of use might be an example of that.

The Convener: We move to Graham Simpson to talk about the thing to which you have all alluded, which is the bus fare cap. Over to you, Graham.

Graham Simpson (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform): I will come on to that. This feels like an old meeting of the cross-party group on sustainable transport, which I used to chair. I have had to keep Ellie Harrison in check several times—not an easy task, convener, I have to say.

Before I come to the bus fare cap, Ellie, you described areas where we have gaps in service. I describe them as bus deserts; they do not exist only in rural areas but also in urban ones. I often bang on about my situation: I live in a big town, East Kilbride, but my bus service was withdrawn years ago and replaced by a service that SPT funds, which is not as good as the rather poor service that was there previously. Therefore, I do not use the bus, because there is no bus service worth having for me.

If I wanted to go into Glasgow by bus, which is a journey of just under 9 miles, it would take me over an hour; I can cycle there quicker—I am not a fast cyclist, but it is all downhill. *[Laughter.]* The reasons for that are, first, congestion, and, secondly, that the buses stop everywhere. Nobody has mentioned that yet. You have mentioned bus priority lanes, but I wonder whether other measures exist to speed buses up, because that is one of the frustrations. That is not only in Glasgow—I see it in Edinburgh, where buses get snarled up in the city centre when you can get there a lot quicker by hopping on a Voi bike, to which I know that the convener is a new recruit. It is very frustrating.

The Convener: We will come back to bus priority lanes.

Graham Simpson: Right, well, I have made my point—I got that off my chest.

The Convener: It is a good preamble for Zen Ghani's questions later.

Graham Simpson: Good. I feel better for it. *[Laughter.]*

On the bus fare cap, the First Minister announced yesterday that, in essence, the £2 cap would be rolled out to Strathclyde. What do witnesses think about that?

Having spoken to some bus operators, I understand that the big bus operators are signed

up to it and were discussing it with their staff last week. Transport Scotland and the big bus operators have been in discussions to be ready for next week, which takes us slightly beyond the 100-day promise that John Swinney made, though only by a few days. Some of the smaller operators, of which there are many in the Strathclyde region, may be struggling, so we might not have a complete picture. Transport Scotland has said that the cap is voluntary, so operators do not have to do it.

I wonder what witnesses' reflections are on that. I will go to Ellie Harrison first, because she is from Strathclyde.

Ellie Harrison: Yesterday, I was surprised but very pleased to see John Swinney commit to rolling the cap out from Monday. It will address one of the issues with the current system of bus deregulation, which is that there is no regulation of the price of fares. That has to change. The cap will address that, but it will do nothing to improve services or put on new routes, which are two crucial things that will be delivered by implementing bus franchising.

The cap addresses only half of the problem. As I said before, it will probably be incredibly costly. I have not looked at the details so do not know how it will operate, but it will require a huge amount of public subsidy that will go directly to the private operators, probably in a similar way to how the Highlands and Islands fare cap works, which, as we found through an FOI request—I wrote about this in the submission—is that the Scottish Government is covering

“between 90% and 98% of the differential”

between the £2 cap and whatever the bus company sets as its usual fare. In rural areas, fares can be £5 or £6, so that is a huge amount of public subsidy for every time that somebody gets on a bus, and it is not really the best use of public money.

The better buses for Strathclyde campaign welcomes the cap, and we claim it as a win, because 13,000 people support our campaign. We made a lot of noise before the election, which we think led to John Swinney's announcement in April to put it in place within 100 days. We are very surprised but pleased that it will be rolled out from Monday and have an impact on people's lives. For people who travel around the Strathclyde area and spend £5 or £6 on a single fare, this will dramatically improve their quality of life and help with the cost of living.

Colin Howden: A lot of the discussion in this evidence session so far has been about availability, but affordability is definitely an issue. As an organisation, we criticise the Scottish

Government for not taking swift enough action, so it is great to see that the Government has made a bold proposition.

As I say, affordability is an issue. In 2022, we published a report called “Fair Fares”, which I think informed the fair fares review. I looked back at that report; it contrasted the fare situation in Scotland with that in Austria, which had just introduced its KlimaTicket, and Germany, which at that point was developing its Deutschlandticket. Compare the fares for season tickets in Scotland, Germany and Austria: for approximately £1,200, you get an all-public transport season ticket for zone 1, which covers Glasgow's immediate city centre; for the same price, you get all public transport across the whole of Austria; and, for approximately £650, you get all local and regional public transport across the whole of Germany. Public transport is significantly more expensive in Scotland than it is across the continent and, as we have heard this week, it is expected that people will have a higher propensity to use public transport with the cap.

The Government has made a bold intervention. We have lots of questions about the policy design. I will perhaps bring in Greig Mackay at this point, but I am happy to expand on my points.

10:15

Greig Mackay: Thank you, Colin. I totally agree. As an organisation representing bus passengers across Scotland and the UK, our view is that any fare reduction is a major bonus to passengers straight away, as it targets the affordability element. What it does not do, however, is improve things such as ticket integration between operators. Passengers will therefore be paying £2 per operator, which is not an ideal situation.

A wider concern, ultimately, is the impact that the policy might have on rail, because it means that we are pitching bus cheaper than rail, which could potentially take passengers off rail and on to bus.

Another question is whether we are ready for that kind of capacity increase when we do not have in place any priority measures for bringing more people into the realm of bus. We are offering people a great-value ticket, but not a better experience in terms of journey speed or reliability. That will ultimately be the decider in whether people will stick with bus, because, while the fare might be cheaper, people want to get to where they want to go in the time that they are meant to get there, without being stuck in road works or because of illegal parking or what have you.

The policy itself is absolutely awesome, but we need to combine it with looking at the bigger picture with regard to making bus a desirable form

of transport, as it already is in Edinburgh. Let us have that example mirrored across Scotland.

Graham Simpson: We will probably come on to discuss integrated ticketing later, but you raise an interesting point.

Some of us have heard concerns that, although it would obviously be a good thing if we got more people on to buses, and those buses ran on similar routes to trains, it would mean that, as long as the bus did not take a lot longer than the train—which it could do—people could choose to use the heavily subsidised bus rather than the Scottish Government-owned train. The Government could therefore lose out both ways, could it not?

Greig Mackay: Well, exactly. For example, I am going up to Aberdeen tomorrow. Potentially, people could be paying £2 to go to Aberdeen versus £70 or £80 for a return ticket on the train. It is a big difference—we are not talking about just a few pounds.

Graham Simpson: I suppose the problem is that we do not know how the £2 cap will work, because it is not Scotland-wide.

Greig Mackay: No, it is not—not yet.

Graham Simpson: So, I am not sure that you could go to Aberdeen for £2.

Greig Mackay: No, but the ambition is for it to be Scotland-wide.

Graham Simpson: Is it a bit confusing at the minute?

Greig Mackay: It is, at the minute. In addition, as Glasgow has the biggest urban rail network, we are now pitching a lot of bus services against rail services in the greater Glasgow area.

Colin Howden: On the point about passengers using bus or rail, Mr Simpson, you said that the policy could lead to abstraction from rail. I have been briefed that, in the Highlands and Islands region, it has led to abstraction from rail. We are in a position, therefore, whereby, whatever the merits of the intervention, we are bringing in a subsidy for bus operators that appears to be abstracting patronage from the railway, which is state owned.

If we set aside our views on state or private ownership, it seems weird that we are bringing in a policy that is taking money away from something that has been recently nationalised. The effect of that is that the Government needs to backfill the ScotRail revenue loss at the same time as putting more subsidy into the bus network. It is clearly an unintended consequence, but that aspect perhaps should have been thought through.

Chris Day: I agree with much of what has been said, but I will throw in a wee point to reflect on. In planning a major transport project, the first

question is whether it should be rail or bus—or tram, but let us not get into that—and then the policy wonks and the transport officers say, “We’ve decided that the best-value project here is a bus project,” or they might suggest a train project. Those are some of the outcomes that I am hearing about here. However, I will ask a question for the committee to chew on: why should public transport users not have some choice?

At the end of the day, every individual knows what form of transport best meets their needs. I know that, financially, this would be absolutely unsustainable, but I am just putting in a marker here to ask why the expectation should not be that the transport user—as long as they are on public transport, I mean; I have a different issue with cars—has a degree of choice?

Ellie Harrison: I want to come back in on the point about rail and bus being in competition at the moment, which is the opposite of what we want in Strathclyde. Get Glasgow Moving is a campaign for integrated public transport. We do not just focus on buses, believe it or not. We want the buses, the trains, the subway, the ferries and active travel to be planned and co-ordinated as part of one network, making it easy for people to get from A to B by using all those different modes in the quickest way possible.

That is why all the transport modes need to be controlled by the same public body, which, in our region, is obviously SPT. It would control the buses. It already owns and controls the subway, but we also need the suburban rail lines to go back under the control of SPT. It needs to control active travel. It needs to become what is referred to as a “total transport authority”. That is a bit like Transport for London, which controls all aspects of the public transport network there, as well as car reduction measures, so it can plan the whole system. We need to get rid of the crazy situation that we have at the moment, with buses competing with rail, and in which we are massively subsidising private operators who run the bus services at the expense of a publicly owned ScotRail.

The Convener: You are a brilliant politician, Ellie. No matter which question you are asked, you manage to pivot back to franchising. You are getting top marks today.

Chris, do you want to come in?

Chris Day: Yes. Just to spice things up, I disagree with Ellie. First, as I said earlier, broadly, we are quite content with the way that things work in Edinburgh, and we do not want it to change. We certainly do not want unelected regional transport partnerships. They are fine; the South East of Scotland Transport Partnership—SEStran—which operates in our area has done a lot of good work

on bus travel. However, it is a quasi-quango; its board is a mixture of councillors along with the great and the good who are not elected by anybody.

We could get into the issue that was rumbling along yesterday about local government reform, but, as things stand, I would certainly not want to see franchising or—

The Convener: We will come back to franchising.

Chris Day: Okay; I will shut up, then.

The Convener: I will pass to Iris Duane.

Iris Duane: I thank the witnesses for their contributions so far. I definitely agree with a lot of what has been said, particularly on lowering the price of access to bus services. A few of you have touched on the efficiency of cost and whether this is the direction that we should be going in, and there have been suggestions about making buses free and about franchising, of course. There has also been quite a lot of talk about a lack of joined-up thinking.

I will start with Ellie, because my questions are most pertinent to you. Are there concerns that the Government is putting in place a temporary stopgap measure rather than using joined-up policy thinking? On that theme, might the bus fare cap exacerbate issues that we already face, such as the reliability of buses and bus routes, rather than tackle the core issues?

Ellie Harrison: Absolutely. The £2 fare cap is a bit of a sticking-plaster policy. As I have said, it will have a massive impact on people's lives in Strathclyde on Monday morning, when they get on a bus and it only costs them £2. That is a great step in the right direction, but we need to address the fundamental problem, which is the complete lack of regulation of bus services across Scotland. That goes back to the Transport Act 1985, and it is crazy to think that we are still running buses under that system across the whole of Scotland.

We need the political will to get rid of that system. On that, I come back to Lloyd Melville's question to me about what is happening in England and Wales. We have seen political leadership from the Governments there to get rid of the system of deregulation that we have had since the 1980s. The Welsh Government is doing that—

The Convener: Ellie, I am going to have a bell here and, every time that you pivot back to this, I am going to ring that bell. Honestly, you will get a chance to talk about franchising in a minute, because I have lots of questions on it, so, if it is okay, please can we stick to the bus fare cap just now? I am sorry to interrupt.

Ellie Harrison: Okay—yes.

Chris Day: I was not going to talk about the bus fare cap.

The Convener: Okay, then let us move on. Iris, have you any more questions on the bus fare cap?

Iris Duane: Yes, briefly. Have we a consensus on the voluntary nature of the cap? We think—we do not know yet—that the larger providers are now signed up to it, but they could also leave at any time. From what you hear from individuals that you speak to and from your members, is that causing any anxiety? Do they believe in the sustainability of the cap?

Greig Mackay: There is definitely concern on the part of smaller operators—and indeed even from SPT, given the operators that they have contracting for them on supported services, because a lot of them tend to be small operators with just a few vehicles. The costs continually go up, year on year, but, of course, they will get less money back in the fare box, which is a major concern. Likewise, although the scheme is voluntary, the operators that I have spoken to have all questioned what the exit strategy is in relation to it, so there is definite concern about the scheme's longevity.

Colin Howden: I do not agree that this is a sticking-plaster policy. It is a bold intervention by the Scottish Government to address affordability, so the Government deserves credit for taking it forward.

Graham Simpson encouraged us to make critical remarks about the fare cap, and I agree that there are problems with the policy's design and the speed at which it is being implemented. To summarise, there are issues in relation to regional disparities—which parts of the country will benefit most—and whether the policy will generate new journeys and lead to modal shift. There appears to be only limited evidence from the English fare caps of £2 and £3 that that will happen. That should have been evaluated following the Highlands and Islands pilot.

What will be the impact on railways? We have talked about that. What will it do to operator service patterns? If they change, and those funds are then taken out, what will be the impact on operations in the longer term? How will operators be reimbursed? As of yesterday—six days out from implementation—operators did not have an understanding of how the scheme would develop. Finally, to come back round—

The Convener: Just stop on that point, Colin. You said that operators did not have—

Colin Howden: My understanding is that, as of yesterday, the operators were not clear when the

scheme was going to start and how it would operate. Greig Mackay might be better placed to talk about that.

The Convener: I presume that the degree of compensation was also not clear.

Greig Mackay: No. As far as I am aware, that has not been finalised.

The Convener: That is astonishing.

Greig Mackay: Yes—that is what I was made aware of, too.

The Convener: In that case, it is no surprise that some of the smaller operators have not signed up.

Greig Mackay: Yes, because they are not clear on what the reimbursement model will look like.

Graham Simpson: I think that that is accurate, and my understanding is that discussions are still going on today.

The Convener: So, next Monday, we could end up with a situation where somebody expects to pay £2 for their fare, but they will have to pay more.

Greig Mackay: Yes—exactly that.

The Convener: How will your members or supporters feel about that?

Greig Mackay: It will be bad publicity for bus again, unfortunately, because the media tend to love bad-news stories about bus. The public perception will be, “I was told it was £2. Why is it not £2?” People do not understand the technicalities of what goes on in the background—nor should they need to. So far as they are concerned, the fare is £2, so they will ask why that is not what they are being asked to pay. That is also putting drivers and front-line staff in a bit of a predicament, because the uncertainty is beyond their control, and yet they will bear the brunt of it because they will have passengers complaining, “Why can’t I pay a £2 fare? It says it’s a £2 fare.”

Graham Simpson: I am not going to say who I have spoken to, but my information is that at least one company’s drivers were being briefed last week about how that might work, because the drivers are at the forefront of dealing with this.

I am concerned that, in Strathclyde, where there are a lot of bus operators, and they are not all the big boys, the smaller companies do not have the staffing capacity to introduce the initiative within this timescale. They may get there or they may choose not to. Therefore, next week, there might be areas in that region where passengers will not be able to get a £2 bus fare.

10:30

We need clarity. We do not have Transport Scotland in front of us today, but I am sure that it will be watching. I would urge the body to write to the committee and get the information out there to the public about where people will be able to get a bus fare for £2 and where they will not.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): I warmly welcome our panel today. In sticking with the bus fare cap, I want to focus on outcomes, value for money and service improvement. The Scottish Government already spends £500 million a year on bus services and concessionary travel. Yesterday’s announcement is likely to result in additional spend of £200 million a year. What outcomes should ministers require to demonstrate that the initiative is a better way of doing things, and that it provides value for money, creates better services and reduces car journeys? The measure cannot simply be a subsidy for a journey that will take place anyway.

I put those questions to Greig first.

Greig Mackay: You are quite right on the point about outcomes. How should we measure success? Should we measure patronage growth? That would be one aspect that we could look at. Should we look at the number of private vehicles entering towns and cities, for example, and examine vehicle flows and counts to see whether there has been a reduction? It is very difficult to quantify.

Also, how would we quantify getting new passengers as a result of the measure? Right now, the people who already use the bus will probably be the ones to benefit. How do we get people out of cars, as Colin mentioned, or will we just pinch people who are using trains? If the latter, we would not be creating modal shift but simply moving people from one public transport mode to another, rather than reducing private vehicle use, which is ultimately what we want to do, and encouraging greater use of public transport whether it be by train or by bus.

There is no easy answer as to how to quantify that. However, the industry will be able to provide a lot of data, such as the number of £2 fares that it sells on each route. It will be able to break down the data from ticket machines to show how many people get on at each stop. There will be a lot of rich data, but how do we drill down into that to see whether there has been a modal shift and whether more people have been converted to bus use? I do not know. That is a trickier question to answer.

Collette Stevenson: It is still early days, too.

Greig Mackay: Absolutely.

Collette Stevenson: Colin, do you want to come in on that?

Colin Howden: Greig has identified some of the points that I would have raised. First, is there patronage growth? Is the initiative growing the market?

Secondly, as Greig also mentioned, is there modal shift? Is it leading to fewer folk choosing to use private cars and more people using public transport? That could be a key indicator of the initiative's success.

Thirdly, what is the impact on climate emissions? The initiative could contribute to reducing emissions in the transport sector, which remain far too high. We have made insufficient progress on those over the past 30 years.

Fourthly, as I touched on earlier, we could look at poverty and child poverty, which have been identified as key priorities for the Scottish ministers. The initiative will benefit people on lower incomes, but it might benefit people differentially across the country. As I illustrated earlier, folk in Edinburgh and the Lothians are likely to benefit more from concessionary fare schemes because we have a more extensive network than other parts of the country, such as the Western Isles, which do not have such a network.

Collette Stevenson: Ellie, would you like to come in?

Ellie Harrison: I reiterate the point that it is a stop-gap policy. We do not want it to apply only in Strathclyde, obviously; we want it to apply across Scotland. It is unfair to have pilots in certain regions while other regions are left behind. We need it to apply across the whole country, as will be the case in England. From January, a £2 fare cap will be in place across England. However, here it is a stop-gap measure while we work towards getting back public control of our bus networks, because once we have that, we can regulate fares.

One example is Greater Manchester, which is the first UK city region to roll out bus franchising. All fares are £2 in Greater Manchester, but that is a hopper fare. When you get on the bus, the money goes to Transport for Greater Manchester, which is the public authority. You can get on as many buses as you need to within an hour for £2. It is like the system in London, where the fare is only £1.75. There, fares are regulated by Transport for London.

We need to be working towards that, because it is a much more efficient use of public money than the current system. At the moment, when someone gets on a bus with a concessionary card or benefits from the fare cap, it is ker-ching for the bus companies, which receive a substantial amount of public subsidy for every journey.

Chris Day: Having looked at the written depositions from the other witnesses, I think that I

am probably the bus historian on the panel, because our submission looks back to the 1950s. In relation to concessionary fares and fare caps, it is important to remember how we got to a situation in which concessionary fares are on the table. They were originally developed by regional councils, reflecting local needs and local priorities; they were seen almost entirely as a subsidy or benefit for elderly people. The concessionary fare system has become part of the political iconography. As I said earlier, I would not recommend that any Government or council suggest pulling it back, but it has traditionally been seen as a benefit for elderly people and, latterly, for younger people.

Now, increasingly, as Colin Howden touched on, a question has come into play. People ask, "If we hold down bus fares, will that help us to meet our climate targets and environmental goals?" Concessionary fares have changed from a kind of social care policy, if you like, to more of an environmental policy, but nobody ever seems to ask the question, "What are we doing this for? What are our objectives in having a fare cap or concessionary fares?" I know what my answer would be, but the policy seems to trundle along in the political sphere without anybody actually asking, "Why are we doing this, and what are we hoping to get out of it?"

I would like to see a lot more people using the bus, and Edinburgh bus patronage back at 250 million a year, which it was in the 1950s—maybe I am a dreamer, but who cares? I do not think that that will happen, but I would love to see more people using the bus, and I would like to see buses have a higher ranking in the media, politics and so on.

I am sorry—I am going off on one here; I will not do that. Those are the questions that I would pose with regard to what you are asking. What are the goals? Is it primarily that we want to see a lot more people using buses, or will we simply see increased bus use without any reduction in car use? Will we see people switching from cars to buses? Will we see health benefits because people are more mobile?

Anyway, I suspect that there is a lot of work ahead for the committee on that.

Collette Stevenson: Am I okay to come in on the Clyde metro?

The Convener: We are a wee bit tight for time. Do you mind if we come back to that?

Collette Stevenson: That is perfectly fine, convener—thank you.

The Convener: I will come to Zen Ghani in a minute; I am just changing the order a little bit. First, I want to summarise what has been said in

this section. I have met lots of transport organisations over the summer, but no one I have met has expressed unqualified support for the bus fare cap. They all do what you have done: they have said that it is a bold move and that they are pleased with it, but there is also a heavy “but”.

Chris Day summed it up when he asked, “What’s it for?” There is also the speed with which the cap is being brought in, the lack of preparation and the fact that we still have lots of questions about it just a few days before it starts. Will it help to expand the number of routes? What will it do for new bus investment? Is it being done for environmental reasons? Is it for climate change? Is it for poverty? What is it for?

The fact that we are asking those questions at this stage, so close to implementation, is something that the Government must listen to, and we should expect that, when the cabinet secretary comes before us next week, he will be able to answer them. I am grateful for your frankness on that matter.

Zen Ghani has some questions on mobility, smart ticketing and priority routes.

Zen Ghani (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP): I thank the panel for coming along today. As many of you will know, it is common practice in many European countries to have integrated ticketing systems, so I would be keen to understand why, from your perspective, we have been a bit slower in implementing such a system in Scotland and what difference it would make to residents across Scotland.

Colin Howden: I am happy to start. I agree that Scotland has been slow at making progress on this, and in that respect, I would contrast where we are in Scotland with the situation in London. London has had the Oyster system since 2003 and the mature Oyster platform since 2010, which provides city-wide cross-operator ticketing for bus, tram, rail, river and tube transport. That has been in place for 16 years now.

The Scottish Government is now talking favourably about moving towards a national smart ticket, and it is great to hear the cabinet secretary talking about it. Unfortunately, the Scottish Government first talked about a national public transport smart card project in 2006; in 2011, it talked explicitly about a multimodal smart card; and in the refresh of the national transport strategy in 2016, it committed to a smart card covering rail, bus, ferry, subway and tram. We have had 20 years of Scottish Governments talking about this but making no progress. I should also add that those Governments came from different political parties; this is not a political party point, because the first Government to talk about this was not a Scottish National Party one. With a fair wind, we

might have something by 2029—that is what the cabinet secretary has spoken about—but, at that point, it will be coming 19 years after what London delivered.

Now, I know that London and Scotland are different geographically, and I am not saying that it would be a simple matter of porting the Oyster card into Scotland, but one would have hoped that we would have made significant progress by now. The technology exists—the ITSO platform, which gives contactless ticketing across 98 per cent of buses, has been in place for a long time—and the capability to integrate nationally exists, too. Therefore, it is really just institutional and political constraints that have led us not to have a national smart card by this point.

Greig Mackay: I echo what Colin Howden has said. The bus industry has moved at great pace since concession cards came in, especially those for the under-22s; there are the various bus apps; and we already have a massive amount of bus integration. Where things fall down is the integration with rail and underground systems.

All of the industry supports such a move, and it could probably turn it all on tomorrow if it wanted to, but the question is, who slices up the pie? Would all the money go to, say, Transport Scotland to slice it up and then pay it out to the operators? That is the real stumbling block. In the greater Glasgow region, for example, would all the money go to SPT to divide it up and send it out?

The issue is not that the technology does not exist or that there is a lack of willingness to implement an integrated system. It is purely to do with how the money is divided fairly among all the different operators, so that they all get the correct amount. That has been the stumbling block and is why we do not quite have that system. I hope that the national smart ticketing advisory board will resolve the issue and allow us to move to that system quickly, because it would make taking public transport easier, as there would be less for somebody to think about, especially if they were automatically charged the best fare all the time, as is the case in London.

10:45

Colin Howden: I disagree on the willingness issue, because I think that a lack of willingness has led to our not making any further progress. We have a zone card in the Strathclyde region, and that allows the revenues that are collected to be given back to the operators. We have an excellent example of how such a system works in Scotland, so I do not understand why it has taken us two decades to make progress on a national scheme.

Over the years, there has been an issue with operators wanting to market their own products,

but the Government now has a lot more control. The Government covers more than 50 per cent of the revenues of bus operators, and, with the introduction of the £2 fare cap, that figure will rise to perhaps 60 or 70 per cent. Transport Scotland and ministers could have been more decisive on the topic over the years, and they now should be.

Zen Ghani: Ellie Harrison, do you have views on that? Do you envisage that bus use would increase with an integrated ticketing system?

Ellie Harrison: Absolutely. It is embarrassing that it has been 23 years since the Oyster card was introduced. I do not want to sound like a broken record, but SPT's plans to bring back the bus network into public control will deliver an integrated ticketing system across buses, trains, the subway and other modes of transport. That is the way to do it, and that is the key difference between what we have in Scotland and what we have in London.

Bus services were not deregulated in London, which was the only part of England, Scotland and Wales that was exempt from the Transport Act 1985, so London has never had a deregulated system. There is a governance issue. Transport for London has control over the whole transport network, which is why it was much easier to implement the Oyster card. When you get on a mode of transport in London, the money goes to the democratically accountable transport authority that is responsible for delivering the services. That is how London managed to deliver its system.

In Strathclyde and across other regions in Scotland, we need to shift towards that model in order to deliver an integrated system. That is the only way to do it. We need to bite the bullet and get all aspects of the public transport network back under the control of democratically accountable regional transport authorities.

The Strathclyde ZoneCard does not do what the Oyster card does. It is incredibly expensive, because private operators set the prices, and you have to buy it in advance. A daily zone card was introduced only two years ago, and I need to buy it in advance if I want to use it. I have to know that I am going to go on enough journeys that day for it to be worth the cost of buying it, and that does not make it easy to use public transport. When I get on public transport, I want to know, every time I tap on a bus, on the subway or on a train, as is the case with the Oyster card, that there will be a daily price cap, which will be set in my interest as a passenger. I want to know that I will not get ripped off and that I do not need to plan in advance, because if I need to make an extra bus journey, the cost of my daily travel will still be capped. We need that system across Scotland.

Chris Day: I have run away from getting involved in integrated transport discussions. My

limited experience of being involved in meetings about smart cards and so on, whether they are national or not, is that they rapidly descend into discussions about which particular tech platform will be used. The tech geeks, if I am allowed to call them that, get really into stuff about RAMs or whatever the technical jargon is, but there is absolutely no focus on what the user needs at the end of the day. That is why I do not get involved in those discussions.

On Ellie Harrison's point about London, it is often not appreciated that bus ridership in London is, in fact, going down. It reached a peak in—oh, I cannot remember exactly when. However, this is all under Sadiq Khan, so it is not a party-political point. Indeed, it is across all the mayors of London. Since that time, something has gone wrong. I have some ideas about what that might be, which I will not get into.

However, that mirrors the—no, I will stop there.

The Convener: Thank you, Chris—you get extra bonus points for that.

Zen, do you want to come back in?

Zen Ghani: I will move on to the issue of bus priority, which we touched on a bit earlier. I learned over summer that some streets in Glasgow—albeit only a couple—use modern technology to alter the traffic light signal such that, if they detect a bus coming, they deliberately leave the light on green a bit longer to let the bus through. That is helpful, obviously. I am keen to know what other measures witnesses feel would help to prioritise buses.

Greig Mackay: Do you want to answer that, Chris?

Chris Day: It is my kind of thing. Basically, bus priority is about traffic management, signals and bus lanes. In Edinburgh, notionally, we have some intelligent signals—if you want to call them that—that detect buses and, in theory, give them priority. There has been a queue management system on the A90 approach into Edinburgh, where it hits the Barnton junction. The problem is that the technology wears out and gets old, and the City of Edinburgh Council had difficulty raising the money to keep it updated. That is an issue.

There is also the issue of the general complexity of managing a system. I am old school enough to believe that the single best thing is a clear bus lane. When Edinburgh introduced its greenways and coloured them green, they acted, as the police said at the time, like a force field: people kept out of them. The problems then relate to enforcement. We have been nagging Scottish ministers about on-bus cameras and camera enforcement and, frankly, Transport Scotland is dragging its heels on that. There are, therefore, serious issues around enforcement.

Collectively, the citizens of Edinburgh and their elected representatives—although not me—voted for a clear and strong message: these are for buses, and also emergency vehicles and cycles, but primarily for buses. You should keep out, or you will get fined.

That was back in the 1990s and, since then, that principle has been chipped away at. The most egregious and silly decision that the City of Edinburgh Council made was to make all bus lanes off-peak. We are now struggling, after seven years, to reverse that. A 7-7-7 lane is supposed to be starting later this year, but it has taken seven years to get to the point where we are expecting to see that implemented.

I am a vigorous supporter of robust, well-enforced, very visible and clearly understood bus lanes—and also bus gates. To make a pedantic point, you can argue that a very short length of bus lane can be a bus gate. If you have something like 10m of bus lane at a strategic point, you can call it a bus gate. That is what you have on Princes Street, for example, which has had basically the same regulations that apply to every other bus lane in the city since 1998 or something like that. Anyway, the message is clear: “Keep out; otherwise you will get fined.”

The Convener: Colin, do you want to come in?

Colin Howden: Chris Day has done a thorough job of isolating the types of bus priority that we would be looking at.

Greig Mackay: I want to add to what Chris Day said about artificial intelligence managing bus priority. I am on the Glasgow city region bus partnership, and I know that Glasgow City Council has been trialling AI projects on various corridors, one of which is on Pollokshaws Road at Shawlands Cross. That sits on top of the traffic management system, which is called the split cycle offset optimisation technique, or SCOOT. Basically, that can save time. For example, if the pedestrian crossings are not used over certain periods, the system saves that time and can detect when a bus is coming along and put the time back into that to give the bus priority. The system can detect whether something is a bus, van or car, or even a cyclist, and can try to get the bus through that section as quickly as possible.

It is quite early on in the trial, but the results have been pretty favourable already, and I think that Glasgow City Council is looking to expand it. The trial is taking place on Pollokshaws Road because it and Paisley Road West are two of the main corridors for which the bus partnership is trying to secure funding to get enforced priority all the way into the city centre in order to give robust journey times all the time. That is a really interesting use of

technology, and I think that other local authorities are looking at how they could use it, too.

Zen Ghani: I do not think that people who park their cars on Pollokshaws Road will be too happy about that.

Greig Mackay: No—I am sure that they will not.

Zen Ghani: Thanks very much.

The Convener: I am conscious of time, and we have two other subjects that we want to cover. I am slightly nervous about venturing into one of them. The other one, on which I will bring in Lloyd Melville at the end, is to do with behaviour and stigma.

However, I think that Graham Simpson wants in first.

Graham Simpson: Sorry for being cheeky, convener. This is just for information. The Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 said that a national smart ticketing advisory board should be set up, and it was set up in November 2023. There have been a number of meetings since, and it has achieved nothing. There are industry people and others on that board, and it meets several times a year, but we have had nothing as a result. It might be worth this committee looking into that. The board exists, but it has not achieved what it is meant to achieve.

The Convener: Thank you for that.

I might know the answer to this next question, which is on franchising, but I am going to ask Ellie Harrison anyway. I have a few difficult questions, and I am being devil’s advocate here. Every time I speak to transport experts, providers and local authority officers about the issue, they suck their teeth and say, “That’s expensive, it’ll take a long time and it will be terribly complicated.” Why do you think that is?

Ellie Harrison: The reason why bus franchising is complicated and costly and takes a long time is largely because of the legislation that this Parliament has created and that transport authorities need to follow.

The Convener: You have alighted on the special independent panel that you mentioned, but we are not even at the stage of that panel, are we?

Ellie Harrison: No.

The Convener: That cannot be the blockage then, if we are not even at that stage.

Ellie Harrison: The Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 was given royal assent in November 2019, obviously, but it took Transport Scotland more than six years to publish the statutory guidance, which is essential for any transport authorities to take

forward bus franchising. That was published only on 17 March, just before the election.

The Convener: Why do you think that was?

Ellie Harrison: I think that it comes down to a lack of expertise and capacity in Transport Scotland, and a lack of political will. It is also down to lobbying from private bus companies that want to maintain the status quo for as long as they can because they are currently making a lot of money out of bus deregulation. All those things have led to the delays that we have had.

11:00

The Convener: Colin Howden was shaking his head there.

Colin Howden: On the capacity issue, Transport Scotland is an organisation with a budget of £4 billion a year. I cannot believe that it is not within Transport Scotland's wit and wisdom to prepare guidance, whether that is guidance on municipal ownership, on bus franchising—as it has now belatedly prepared—or on statutory bus—

The Convener: So, why do you think it is, then?

Colin Howden: I do not know. Perhaps Ellie Harrison is right—perhaps it is a lack of willingness to make progress. It cannot be capacity. Transport Scotland is a huge organisation with a large staff, and it could have chosen to prioritise the development of guidance, whether on franchising or on partnerships, had it so chosen. I think that you are going to have to ask Transport Scotland.

The Convener: Does anybody else have an answer?

Greig Mackay: It is the same with the guidance on bus service improvement partnerships—that is still not yet finalised either. All the partnerships that we are part of are working towards the BSIPs, but we cannot finalise things because we do not yet have the guidance to do it.

I do not know why it has taken so long, but I think that Transport Scotland might have the answer.

The Convener: I hear that it is very nervous about legal challenges—

Greig Mackay: That is probably the crux of it.

The Convener: —and that some of the bus companies just want to threaten it. However, people have managed to do it elsewhere. Have there been legal challenges elsewhere?

Ellie Harrison: Do you mean in England?

The Convener: Yes.

Ellie Harrison: I put this in my written evidence. Every single bus in Wales will be franchised before 2030; there will not be a deregulated bus on Welsh

soil after 2030. That was in the Bus Services (Wales) Act 2026, which was passed in February this year, and it is now in motion. In England, the Bus Services Act 2025 was passed at the end of last year to simplify the process of bus franchising even further, and to make it legal for local transport authorities to be able to set up new publicly owned operators, which they can now do in England. We can do that in Scotland—we have been able to do it since 2022.

We are seeing it happen in the big city regions. Greater Manchester was the first—that is the only place where bus franchising has been rolled out, but over the next three years the city regions will be falling like dominoes and all those bus networks will come back into public control. In Liverpool city region—

The Convener: The point was about legal challenge—

Ellie Harrison: There has been only one such challenge, and that was in Greater Manchester. Stagecoach, along with Rotalla, which is another private operator in the region, took Transport for Greater Manchester to court over its franchising proposals. It was a judicial review, so all that it could do was decide whether Transport for Greater Manchester had followed the steps that are set out in the law. It concluded that those steps had been followed, and Stagecoach lost. Greater Manchester bore the cost of the legal challenge for the whole of England, really, because all the other city regions are now progressing bus franchising free of legal challenge.

Unfortunately, a legal challenge probably will happen in Strathclyde, because Strathclyde is blazing a trail for Scotland. We are the Greater Manchester of Scotland, and a big bus company has already threatened SPT with legal action, but that can only be a judicial review, and it can only decide whether SPT has followed the steps that are set out in law. If it has followed those steps, what it has done is completely legal—

The Convener: Have ministers ever told you why it has taken so long?

Ellie Harrison: No. I would like an answer as to why it has taken so long. A key point is that, because we have a really complex process to follow—it is more complicated than the process in England—there are more things that a judicial review could look at, because there are more steps in the process. There are more things to trip SPT up along the way—

The Convener: If the better buses bill—it is so named only for alliteration purposes—does not streamline of the process, are you pessimistic about whether franchising will happen?

Ellie Harrison: I think that franchising will happen—

The Convener: Even with the proposed better buses bill and the current legislation?

Ellie Harrison: Even with the legislation, but it does need to be simplified.

The Convener: So I get—

Ellie Harrison: What we have in the 2019 act is completely unworkable in the long term.

The Convener: So if it—

Ellie Harrison: And there is one key reason for that: not only do you have to go through the panel to get the franchising proposals approved, you have to go through the panel again for every single variation that you might want to make to your franchising framework. That sort of thing does not exist in England and Wales, and it is going to make things completely unworkable in the long term.

The Convener: So if it—

Ellie Harrison: It has to change, and it has to happen in parallel to SPT developing its work.

The Convener: You are so difficult to control. I can see why you run this campaign.

Ellie Harrison: I am very frustrated—

The Convener: You are—I can tell.

Ellie Harrison: I have been waiting a very long time for progress.

The Convener: You say that it is unworkable in the long term, but you think that it will still happen. In that case, how important is it that the better buses bill streamlines the process? Is it essential?

Ellie Harrison: It is essential, yes.

The Convener: That is fine.

I am going to stop there, Ellie, because I know that we could go on for some time with this subject. I really appreciate it, though. I know that I am trying to curtail your contributions, but it is a very important subject and I do appreciate your work.

Colin, do you want to come in with a final comment on this?

Colin Howden: Improvements to the franchising provisions might need to be brought forward in the new bill. However, we do not have a new bill to look at, so I cannot give you any informed comment on it.

The only thing on which I would disagree with Ellie Harrison is that, from talking to SEStran, Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership and North East of Scotland Transport Partnership, I would say that those three areas, which make up a substantial chunk of Scotland, are not minded to

move towards franchising. They favour a partnerships approach. I think that we need to be a wee bit careful about telling the folk in the Highlands, in Aberdeen and, indeed, in south-east Scotland, which Chris Day talked about at length earlier in the session, that they need to implement a franchising system.

Certainly, a franchising system in south-east Scotland would put at risk the excellent bus service that we have in the Lothians and Edinburgh. Frankly, I think that the one thing that would probably make the good folk of Edinburgh riot would be a suggestion that their bus service was going to get broken up through franchising.

The Convener: I call Lloyd Melville to conclude the evidence session.

Lloyd Melville: Thank you. I want to turn from franchising, which I am broadly in favour of, towards behaviour on buses. I have heard some horror stories from my constituents about the poor behaviour of some bus users and about that being a block to people getting on the bus, because they feel as though there are almost no limits on it and there is no control over it. What are your reflections on that, and what measures do you think need to be brought in to curtail some of the poor behaviour on our buses?

Greig Mackay: You are quite right: antisocial behaviour on buses is definitely on the rise. However, I would also point out that it does not always come from those in the under-22 scheme.

Lloyd Melville: I did not say that it did.

Greig Mackay: Unfortunately, it affects front-line staff. Lothian Buses frequently reports incidents that it has, as does Stagecoach in the north of Scotland; in fact, when Stagecoach ordered the new electric coaches that now operate between Moray and Aberdeen, it had to put bandit screens in them. That was a first for coaches, and it was because the drivers and the union pushed for that safety element. We have never seen the like of a safety screen on a coach, and it illustrates the predicament that we are facing when it comes to safety on buses.

A lot of passengers feel somewhat unsafe when large groups of, say, under-22s come on to the bus. They are not necessarily being antisocial—it is just that a large number come on at one time. The issue that we have across Scotland is that a lot of under-22s, especially school kids, might go to school on the school bus, but they come home on service buses instead. Other passengers feel intimidated when 30 or 40 children all pile on to the service just to go three stops; of course, it also slows the service down, because they have to get their cards scanned et cetera. There has definitely been an element of behavioural change on buses.

Lloyd Melville: Just before we move on to talk about solutions, I want to ask about the issue of perception, which you have just touched on. As you have said, antisocial behaviour has undoubtedly risen on buses. What do you think are the factors behind that?

Greig Mackay: I do not know. Maybe it is fallout from the pandemic and societal change or behavioural change, because it is happening on trains as well. It is not isolated to buses. There has definitely been a change. In a lot of bus stations and elsewhere, there is a lack of staff, especially in the evening hours, and people feel less safe. Also, more young people are using public transport in general, and especially buses, so large groups are congregating. It is a perfect storm, in that sense.

Colin Howden: Greig Mackay isolated well the measures that can be taken to address antisocial behaviour and I do not have a great deal to add on that.

On other interventions, for the past seven years we have been running the love my bus youth programme, which has gone into schools. That involves working with local authorities and the police to communicate to children of late primary and early secondary school age about the dangers that they can cause to other people through misbehaviour on buses but also how they can be safe in using buses. We were active in the Tayside and Central Scotland Transport Partnership region, including Angus, over the past year, and we are hoping to do more work in that space. There are equivalent educational schemes across Scotland. We need to reinforce that work. Unfortunately, Transport Scotland cut the funding for that, so we are no longer delivering that scheme in Angus, but we hope that we will return in future years.

Ellie Harrison: I reiterate what Chris Day said. We want to make bus a desirable mode of transport—which it is in Edinburgh—everywhere across Scotland. Part of that involves making people feel safe on buses, particularly women, who make up a disproportionate number of bus users, and elderly and disabled people.

On what SPT is proposing to do, I draw your attention to the letter that it sent to the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport, which I linked to in my submission. It has asked for the

“Development of a Regional Transport Coordination Centre ... to enhance real-time network management, cross-boundary coordination and overall system resilience across the Strathclyde region.”

That is based on what is being done in the West Midlands, where there is a centre that has an overview of the entire transport network and it can

observe what is going on on the network and respond to any incidents a lot more quickly.

It is about regionalising oversight over the transport network under SPT, which is the democratically accountable transport authority, so that it can monitor what is happening and respond to incidents quickly. It is also about making the network as appealing and attractive as it can be to all passengers.

Lloyd Melville: Thank you for those answers. Chris, there is an extra dynamic in Edinburgh in that there appears to be a long-standing cross-community approach to getting on the bus rather than the bus being seen as a last resort. Has that impacted behaviour on buses in the city region?

Chris Day: I have no idea, frankly. The statistics say that antisocial behaviour on buses has increased, but it is not clear to us to what extent that is unique to buses or whether buses are a factor in that. We quite often see people in the media saying, “Loads of kids are coming into our area from outside and they do that with a bus pass,” but we think, “Are they? Do they?”

I came here on the number 8 bus this morning, and it was almost a school bus, because I came in just before school time. The kids were standing there quietly and politely. They were not interrupting. They were glued to their phones. Personally, I have not seen a lot of what I would call antisocial behaviour. I suppose that there is low-key antisocial behaviour, with people bringing on rather foul-smelling takeaways or putting their feet on the seats—which I think is bloody antisocial because it dirties the seats and messes things up for other people.

11:15

On the extremes that we read about, as far as EBUG is concerned, if anyone is violent towards a bus driver or other passengers, we should come down on them like a ton of bricks. There is no question about that. There is no excuse for such behaviour. However, I am not clear about whether that is a wider social problem or whether there is something about buses—it is also an issue on trains, as Greig Mackay mentioned—that perhaps encourages such behaviour. When we look at some of the headlines, we have to ask, “Is this really helpful in isolating what the problem is?”

Colin Howden mentioned the love my bus campaign. The people who work on that do brilliant work with kids. I would recommend that the committee look at that.

The Convener: I will bring Graham Simpson back in for one final question.

Graham Simpson: Thank you, convener.

I was just having a wee look at the programme for government that was announced yesterday. It has been suggested—I am reading the wording of the programme for government—that the Government wants to look to

“Bring Transport Scotland back into the Scottish Government.”

I am not entirely sure what that means. I thought that Transport Scotland was part of the Scottish Government. However, I have no doubt that we will find that out.

The Government will also

“Consult on transferring the Mobility and Access Committee into the Scottish Government.”

That could relate to buses, which we are talking about today. We have also covered smart and integrated ticketing, in relation to which the Government is going to

“Review the functions of the National Smart Ticketing Advisory Board to ascertain if they should transfer to the Scottish Government, or elsewhere in the public sector.”

That might be the first that you have heard of that.

Chris Day: Sorry, could you repeat that?

Graham Simpson: The Government will

“Review the functions of the National Smart Ticketing Advisory Board”—

which has not achieved very much—

“to ascertain if they should transfer to the Scottish Government, or elsewhere in the public sector.”

I have no idea what that means. I am just reading from the programme for government. Does anyone have an instant response to that that does not relate to franchising? *[Laughter.]*

Ellie Harrison: It all comes back to franchising—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry, Colin—my mic’s on. *[Laughter.]* It all comes back to franchising, because we are still dealing with the deregulated system that was brought in in 1986.

As I said before, we welcome the announcement of the plan to abolish Transport Scotland. Transport governance is really not rocket science. Zen Ghani mentioned what is happening in other parts of Europe. All those countries use the same model. It is a regional model, in which all control of all public transport is in the hands of the regional transport authority. We need to move towards that.

HITRANS, SEStran, and Nestrans, which Colin Howden mentioned, are model 1 RTPs—

Graham Simpson: Hang on—

The Convener: Ellie—

Ellie Harrison: —that have only a handful of staff.

Graham Simpson: I asked for a comment on the smart ticketing advisory board. If anyone has a comment on that, I ask them to put their hand up.

Greig Mackay: With regard to the make-up of the board, I think that it includes the Confederation of Passenger Transport Scotland and Young Scot, as well as various other people from Transport Scotland and industry. I am only surmising, but I think that the plan might be to bring all of that within the wider Government, which would make it a core function. That would mean that the Government could not just say, “Okay, we’ve achieved that—that’s the end of it.” The view might be that that should be a longer-term process.

The Convener: Do you have anything to add, Colin?

Colin Howden: I would like to briefly respond to the point about Transport Scotland, which was the first organisation that Mr Simpson mentioned. Transport Scotland is part of the Scottish Government—it is an executive agency of the Scottish Government, and its staff are civil servants—so I do not understand what the Government is doing there. No one knows. I have asked very senior people in the Scottish transport industry, and no one seems to know what is going on.

I am not saying that reform is not required; reform probably is required. I have made lots of critical remarks about Transport Scotland during this session. The issue might be one of competence, rather than being specifically to do with Transport Scotland’s organisational structure, in so far as it is already part of the Scottish Government.

The Convener: At that point, I will draw things to a conclusion. I love the passion of all of you, especially Ellie’s. Without people like you, the world would be a poorer place. I thank all four of you for your contributions, which have all been excellent.

We have run over by 20 minutes, but that is because there has been so much to say. I am sure that we will return to the issue of buses. We will have further discussions on all the subjects that have been raised today, and we will have plenty of opportunities to scrutinise them further.

That concludes the public part of today’s meeting. We now move into private session.

11:21

Meeting continued in private until 11:52.

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