**Public Petitions Committee**
**Thursday 5 November 2026**
**5th Meeting, 2026 (Session 7)**

# PE2246: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers

## Introduction

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| **Petitioner** | Ellie Harrison on behalf of the Better Buses National Coalition |
| **Petition Summary** | Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to improve the process for implementing the bus franchising powers in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 by:<br>• amending the Act to remove the requirement for proposed franchising frameworks to be approved by a panel appointed by the Traffic Commissioner, instead empowering Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs) to have the final say;<br>• providing additional funding to support RTPs in preparing franchising frameworks and assisting them with initial set-up costs once frameworks are approved. |
| **Website** | https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2246 |

1. This is a new petition that was published on 25 August 2026.

2. A full summary of this petition and its aims can be found at **Annexe A**.

3. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 1,980 signatures have been received on this petition.

4. A SPICe briefing has been prepared to inform the Committee's consideration of the petition and can be found at **Annexe B**.

5. The Committee seeks views from the Scottish Government on all new petitions before they are formally considered.

6. The Committee has received submissions from the Scottish Government and the Petitioner which are set out in **Annexe C** of this paper.

## Action

7. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

**Clerks to the Committee**
**November 2026**

# Annexe A: Summary of petition

## PE2246: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers

**Petitioner:**

Ellie Harrison on behalf of the Better Buses National Coalition

**Date published:**

25 August 2026

**Petition summary:**

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to improve the process for implementing the bus franchising powers in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 by:

- amending the Act to remove the requirement for proposed franchising frameworks to be approved by a panel appointed by the Traffic Commissioner, instead empowering Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs) to have the final say;

- providing additional funding to support RTPs in preparing franchising frameworks and assisting them with initial set-up costs once frameworks are approved.

**Background information:**

There is widespread consensus across the UK that the policy of bus deregulation (implemented in 1986) has failed to deliver the integrated and affordable public transport urgently required to meet climate targets and reduce inequalities.

The bus franchising powers in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 were meant to enable transport authorities to bring local bus networks back under public control, so that they can be planned and coordinated in the public interest.

However, the Scottish Government has severely delayed the implementation of bus franchising - taking over 6 years to publish required statutory guidance. It has created the most complex and time-consuming legislation in the UK, with the additional requirement for franchising proposals to be approved by the Traffic Commissioner's panel, which will add a year to the process as well as the risk of rejection. This means it may be 2031 before bus franchising is implemented anywhere in Scotland.

# Annexe B: SPICe Briefing

Scottish Parliament Information Centre
Ionad Fiosrachaidh Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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

### Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

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

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

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

A franchising framework must specify:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- "It is possible to amend the Act to remove the panel requirement. These amendments would need changes to primary legislation which would take time to deliver as the panel process is fundamental to the current franchising process, if this is removed, there may be a need to revisit the entire approach to franchising.

- We are committed to carrying out further consideration of the panel process with stakeholders."

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

**Key Organisations and relevant links**

- Confederation of Passenger Transport: Bus industry representative body.

- Bus Users Scotland: Bus passenger representative body.

- Scottish Collaboration of Transportation Specialists: Organisation representing senior local authority transport officers.

- Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers: Organisation representing local authority officers involved in public transport.

- Traffic Commissioner for Scotland: UK Government appointed Commissioner responsible for bus operator and driver licensing, with a specific role in the bus franchising process.

**Alan Rehfisch**
**Senior Researcher**
9 October 2026

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

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in petition briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

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# Annexe C: Written Submissions

## PE2246/A: Accelerate the implementation of bus franchising powers

**Scottish Government written submission, 22 September 2026**

**Does the Scottish Government consider the specific ask[s] of the petition to be practical or achievable? If not, please explain why.**

- We want all local transport authorities to be able to improve bus services within their areas. Our approach empowers local transport authorities to determine what is best to address any transport challenges in their local areas.

- Through the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, we have equipped local transport authorities with a range of powers to support partnership working, bus franchising and running local bus services, alongside their existing ability to subsidise services.

- Franchising is an important option for local transport authorities seeking to improve local bus provision. It can bring significant benefits for both passengers and communities but is also a substantial intervention in the local bus market with the potential to have serious impacts both within the franchising area, as well as in neighbouring authorities.

- To support successful outcomes, the current franchising model provides rigorous scrutiny of a local transport authority’s proposals via an independent panel to safeguard passengers' interests and help protect the wider bus network from unintended consequences arising from insufficiently developed proposals.

- It is possible to amend the Act to remove the panel requirement. These amendments would need changes to primary legislation which would take time to deliver as the panel process is fundamental to the current franchising process, if this is removed, there may be a need to revisit the entire approach to franchising.

- We are committed to carrying out further consideration of the panel process with stakeholders.

- On funding, we will invest £4 million in 2026-27 to support local transport authorities to build business cases for local bus improvements through franchising. Work to develop appropriate governance arrangements and the detail of administering the fund is progressing.

**What, if any, action is the Scottish Government currently taking to address the issues raised by this petition, and is any further action being considered that will achieve the ask[s] of this petition?**

- The Scottish Government is committed to working with stakeholders to take action to improve bus services.
- In line with our 100 days and Programme for Government commitments, we have begun engagement on our prospective Better Buses legislation which aims to help enhance the delivery of bus services across Scotland.
- A Stakeholder roundtable took place on 26th August 2026 where initial options were presented for discussion and attendees provided valuable feedback which will help shape the development of the programme.
- This marked the first stage of the consultation process and there will be further opportunities for engagement and discussion as our proposals develop.
- As part of the Better Buses programme, we will review the existing franchising model and explore with stakeholders the options for and implications of amendments.
- Decisions on future funding will be considered as part of the forthcoming annual Budget Bill process.

**Bus Policy / Bus, Concessionary and Active Travel**

## 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.