



URBAN TRANSPORT GROUP

Written submission

Bus franchising

Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure
Committee

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1 About the Urban Transport Group

- 1.1 The Urban Transport Group (UTG) is the UK's network of transport authorities. UTG represents the seven largest city region strategic transport bodies in England, which, between them, serve over twenty million people in Greater Manchester (Transport for Greater Manchester), London (Transport for London), the Liverpool City Region (Merseytravel), Tyne and Wear (Nexus), the Sheffield City Region (South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority), the West Midlands (Transport for West Midlands) and West Yorkshire (West Yorkshire Combined Authority).
- 1.2 Our wider associate membership includes Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, Nottingham City Council, Strathclyde Partnership for Transport, Tees Valley Combined Authority, West of England Combined Authority, Translink (Northern Ireland) and Transport for Wales.
- 1.3 We are a thought leader in urban and local transport policy, bringing together stakeholders across the transport sector to advocate for policies that deliver affordable, trusted, green transport networks that enrich and connect people and places.



2 Overview of bus operations in England

- 2.1 Bus services outside London were deregulated in 1986. Since then, there have been two systems of bus provision – one for London and one for the rest of Great Britain, with Greater Manchester currently introducing a franchised network across their region.
- 2.2 In London, Transport for London (TfL, which is accountable to the Mayor) uses bus franchising to specify in detail what bus services are to be provided. TfL decides the routes, timetables and fares – everything down to the colour of the buses. The services themselves are operated by private companies through a competitive tendering process. There is no on-road competition¹.
- 2.3 Greater Manchester is the first Mayoral Combined Authority to use the powers granted in the Bus Services Act 2017 and the MCA's Devolution deal to franchise its bus network. We explore the progress and impact of this later in this note.
- 2.4 In the rest of the country, it is a deregulated market. Anyone (subject to minimum safety and operating standards) can operate a bus service. Operators are free to run whatever services they like as well as decide the fares they will charge and the vehicles they will use.
- 2.5 Local transport authorities (LTAs) outside of London cannot directly plan bus networks, they can only fill the gaps in commercial networks. LTAs have the power to subsidise routes that are not considered by bus operators to be commercially viable but are deemed socially necessary. This is almost always done through a contract with a bus company.
- 2.6 LTAs have been increasingly called upon to support socially necessary bus routes as commercial networks shrink, with COVID accelerating an existing pattern of decline. At the same time, pressures on local authority budgets have made it difficult to preserve and maintain these routes².
- 2.7 The 2017 Bus Services Act introduced new ways in which services can be improved within the existing deregulated market through formalising the way in which operators work with transport authorities in voluntary partnership³. These include Enhanced Partnership Schemes, where a local transport authority and multiple commercial bus operators agree a Bus Plan. An EP is a statutory partnership between one or more LTAs and their local bus operators, setting out how they will work together to improve bus services. Unlike franchising, bus operators continue to take fares revenue and make decisions on how bus services are run.

¹UTG (2023) A Smoother Ride - Reviewing the Bus Services Act 2017 to empower local areas

² Transport Committee (2019) Bus Services in England outside London

³ DfT (2017) The Bus Services Act 2017



3 Bus Franchising in England

- 3.1 The Bus Services Act 2017 also allowed LTAs to franchise bus networks (or parts of the network). Under franchising, the local deregulated bus market is reformed, and bus operators instead compete to provide services under contract to the LTA.
- 3.2 Under the Act, powers to pursue franchising were automatically granted to Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) whilst other LTAs must seek permission from the Secretary of State (SoS) to proceed.
- 3.3 Once an authority has obtained franchising powers, there is an extensive process before a franchising scheme can be enacted⁴. The authority must produce an assessment or 'business case' for the proposed franchise scheme using data gathered from incumbent bus operators in its area. The business case consists of a five case model (analysing the strategic, economic, financial, commercial and management case). These must be compared against alternative courses of action and the benefits, impacts, costs and risks of each considered.
- 3.4 A consultation is then needed on the franchising proposals, which allows a range of stakeholders including passengers, local businesses and existing bus operators to provide their comments. Finally, at least a six-month transition period is needed before the scheme is implemented, giving time for both new and incumbent operators to transition.

Benefits

- 3.5 As in London, franchising enables LTAs to plan, develop and regulate bus services for their areas and offer passengers simpler, integrated ticketing and guaranteed levels of service quality. Under franchising, LTAs can determine, for example, what bus services are to be provided, when and where; fares that are charged; and the standards those services should meet (for example, on emissions, passenger experience, branding). Operators then compete through a procurement process to deliver those services in line with the LTA's specifications. No other services may operate in the area without the agreement of the LTA.
- 3.6 London's franchising scheme has delivered a world-class, comprehensive bus network. Over 99% of Londoners are within 600 metres of a bus stop. It benefits from a fully accessible and modern vehicle fleet as well as integrated, smart and simple ticketing⁵.
- 3.7 Given only one Authority outside of London has so far introduced franchising, it is too early to estimate the direct impact of franchising. However, latest punctuality data for Greater Manchester's Bee Network services in the first franchised area shows improving performance⁶. To date, the costs for franchise contracts have been

⁴ UTG (2023) A Smoother Ride - Reviewing the Bus Services Act 2017 to empower local areas

⁵ [https://www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-london-assembly-does/questions-mayor/find-an-answer/planning-bus-services-3#:~:text=Transport%20for%20London's%20\(TfL's\)%20bus,assess%20comprehensiveness%20and%20network%20coverage](https://www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-london-assembly-does/questions-mayor/find-an-answer/planning-bus-services-3#:~:text=Transport%20for%20London's%20(TfL's)%20bus,assess%20comprehensiveness%20and%20network%20coverage)

⁶ Been Network Bus Punctuality Reports - <https://tfgm.com/ways-to-travel/bus/punctuality-report>



competitive, particularly when compared to the costs of tendering individual services. Revenue for franchised services continues to exceed forecast⁷.

3.8 From the passenger perspective, franchising enables:

- Simple, unified and integrated ticketing and products under one brand.
- A single identity for bus services and potentially other public transport modes, which is easy to understand for new and existing users.
- Unified, easy to use network of integrated public transport services.
- Consistent standards of service, including vehicle, driver and customer care standards.
- One accountable body, integrated real time information and a single point of contact for customers.

3.9 From a transport authority perspective, franchising enables the LTA to:

- Plan, develop and regulate bus services for their areas and offer passengers simpler, integrated ticketing and guaranteed levels of service quality.
- Take a strategic approach to planning the bus network.
- Integrate the bus network with other modes to help ensure that services support wider goals for an area, based on the needs of local communities and the local economy.
- Have and provide certainty, as opposed to the uncertainty under deregulation where bus operators may decide to deregister any bus service no longer considered profitable and LTAs face a decision on whether they can step in and fund that service.
- Deliver a more integrated network, which is easier to use and to market to new customers and visitors, encouraging patronage growth which in turn can help drive up revenue.
- Help reduce car dependency, emissions and highway congestion as more people make use of an integrated public transport network and active travel modes (cycling and walking)
- Cross-subsidise less remunerative services using revenue from more commercial routes.
- Enables existing resources and subsidies to be pooled efficiently, driving better value.
- As public bodies, reinvest any surpluses generated in the network in support of wider goals and network development.

3.10 From an operator perspective, franchising offers:

- A growing, stable and enduring market.
- Certainty and long-term stability of income with no revenue risk.

⁷ 21st March 2024, Bee Network Committee report



- The freedom to focus on service delivery, making sure buses run reliably and punctually, enhancing customer care and delivering on contractually guaranteed service standards – such as cleanliness, reliability and safety and security.

4 Authorities progressing franchising in England

4.1 Since 2017, only one MCA – the Greater Manchester Combined Authority - has enacted bus franchising, although other MCAs are now taking their first steps towards franchising or are actively considering it.

Greater Manchester Combined Authority

4.2 In the case of Greater Manchester, the total time taken between announcing its intention to prepare an assessment, to the first franchised buses commencing operation was over six years. **(See Annex 1 for a table of GM's timeline)**

4.3 First mover disadvantage and COVID both contributed to these timelines. However, without COVID (and the complications this added) we estimate that the first franchised buses could have entered service by around May 2021, at the earliest⁸.

4.4 The costs for Greater Manchester's five-year bus-franchising transition process were estimated at roughly £135m⁹.

4.5 Greater Manchester has set out targets for the franchised network¹⁰. By 2030 their ambition is for:

- A 30% increase in bus patronage from 2022/23 levels.
- Buses to run at least every 12 minutes on key orbital and radial routes.
- 90% of the entire Greater Manchester population to be able to access a 30-minute frequency bus or Metrolink service on weekdays within 400m of their home. Other options (e.g. DRT) will be put in place in parts of the city region where this is not possible.
- On-street bus improvements across 70km of high frequency, strategic bus routes across Greater Manchester by 2030.

4.6 The first franchised bus services entered service in Bolton, Wigan and Salford and Bury in September 2023. Services have since been added in Oldham, Rochdale and parts of north Manchester. Under the final round of contracts, there will be a total of nine franchises (five large and four small) across the south of Greater Manchester, covering 248 different services¹¹.

⁸ UTG (2023) A Smoother Ride - Reviewing the Bus Services Act 2017 to empower local areas

⁹ GMCA (2019) Bus Franchising in Greater Manchester Assessment

¹⁰ TfGM (2023) Greater Manchester Bus Strategy

¹¹ GMCA (February 2024) Delivering the Bee Network: Bus Franchising Implementation Update



Liverpool City Region Combined Authority

- 4.7 Following public consultation in summer 2023, Liverpool City Region Mayor Steve Rotheram made the decision to move to a bus franchising model in the region.
- 4.8 A three-year transition period will now take place to allow network improvement measures – such as bus prioritisation infrastructure and the reintroduction of bus lanes in Liverpool – to be introduced before the first franchised services begin. Franchising in Liverpool will be introduced in phases, with the first franchised buses starting to run in St Helens by late 2026 and the move to a fully franchised system across the whole of the Liverpool City Region by the end of 2028¹².

West Yorkshire Combined Authority

- 4.9 In 2023, West Yorkshire Combined Authority's Franchising Assessment Report, reviewed by an independent auditor, explored the options for bus reform and concluded that bus franchising would offer clear strategic benefits to the region. This report was followed by a public consultation into franchising that closed in January 2024. Mayor Tracy Brabin announced the decision to proceed with franchising on 14 March.
- 4.10 The proposed franchising scheme is expected to come into operation in June 2026, with franchised buses on the road from March 2027. The scheme will see the region broken into ten zones based around the existing large depots. Rollout is expected to be completed by early 2028¹³.
- 4.11 The MCA has assumed that there will be an initial cost of £20m to set up franchising (consultancy, mobilisation and management) and investment in depots (£85.5million) and fleet (£252 million) over a 15 year period, with the ongoing costs covered through a mix of fare revenue and the existing Transport Levy¹⁴.

South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority

- 4.12 In 2022, the Mayor and Leaders at the Mayoral Combined Authority Board approved the recommendation to prepare an assessment of a proposed bus franchising scheme.
- 4.13 The subsequent Franchising Assessment Report found that over the past decade, bus mileage in the region declined by 42 per cent and concluded that buses in the region should be franchised, with depots and fleet owned by the Mayoral Combined Authority being the preferred option¹⁵.
- 4.14 The progression of the proposed franchising scheme was approved in March 2024. Currently an independent audit is being undertaken on the scheme and proposals, following which the MCA Board will need to make a decision on whether to continue

¹² LCRCA (October 2023) The Liverpool City Region Franchising Scheme for Buses 2023

¹³ WYCA (March 2024) West Yorkshire Bus Reform Report on Franchising Decision

¹⁴ WYCA (March 2024) Bus Reform Assessment

¹⁵ SYMCA (March 2024) Mayoral Combined Authority Board - South Yorkshire Bus Reform



with the process. If a decision to continue were to be made, the MCA would need to undertake a 12-week public consultation, ahead of a final decision being made on implementing the scheme.

Cornwall

- 4.15 In 2015, Cornwall Council became the first shire county to receive London-style bus franchising powers upon signing a devolution deal with the government¹⁶.
- 4.16 The Council launched an enhanced supported network with a uniform Transport for Cornwall red livery, saying it would only use its franchising powers as a last resort if partnership did not work¹⁷.
- 4.17 All supported services are branded Transport for Cornwall, a partnership between the council, the Go-Ahead subsidiary and its three subcontractors. The council also adopted the name as the new title for its One Public Transport System for Cornwall partnership.

5 UTG recommendations to improve England's approach

- 5.1 Learning from the experience of our members, who are currently at various stages of their franchising journeys, below we outline the key changes we believe need to take place to improve franchising in England. This builds on our report 'A Smoother Ride: Reviewing the Bus Services Act 2017 to empower local areas'.

Grant powers to all

- 5.2 The DfT describes franchising as 'a big decision which – as well as creating new opportunities – can have significant implications for existing bus operators and passengers and potentially expose local authorities to significant financial risks.¹⁸ This is the reasoning behind the Department's decision for franchising powers to be only available automatically to MCAs. Other types of authorities can request the powers, but secondary legislation is required to confer them, and the consent of the Secretary of State (SoS) is required before they can begin to use the powers. This effectively puts a restriction on those towns and rural areas that are not MCAs that may wish to pursue franchising¹⁹.
- 5.3 All areas should be given automatic rights to bus franchising powers, not just Mayoral Combined Authorities. The requirement for the Secretary of State for Transport's

¹⁶ Cornwall Council (2015) 2015 Cornwall Devolution Deal

¹⁷ <https://www.keybuses.com/article/cornwall-does-things-differently>

¹⁸ DfT (2017) The Bus Services Act 2017: Franchising Scheme Guidance

¹⁹ UTG (2023) A Smoother Ride - Reviewing the Bus Services Act 2017 to empower local areas



approval for non-Mayoral Combined Authorities for franchising is counter to the principles of devolution.

De-risk and simplify process

- 5.4 Considering the Greater Manchester experience, there is a strong case for further simplifying the process, reviewing the experience of the use of the legislation as it stands and how it could be improved. This should be reflected in the provision of up-to-date guidance, models and templates (e.g. model contracts) to help simplify, streamline and minimise risks and delays²⁰.
- 5.5 The Bus Services Act 2017 guidance effectively requires an authority to carry out an enhanced five case business case model (analysing the strategic, economic, financial, commercial and management case) arguably going beyond what would be required for a typical capital scheme.
- 5.6 The process includes developing all five cases for options other than the preferred option. Any process must, of course, carefully weigh-up the merits of what is a significant policy decision. It must also properly consider the impacts on incumbent operators to avoid risks of challenge either at legislation or assessment stage. However, further simplification, templates and frameworks to support assessment would help, including a more proportionate approach depending on the scale of the proposals.

Guarantee data access

- 5.7 Section 19 of the Bus Services Act requires operators to disclose information about revenue and patronage to the local transport authority when an operator cancels a service²¹.
- 5.8 Whilst the information provisions in the Transport Act 2000 allow for provision of relevant information about local bus services from operators, in Greater Manchester's case, this took time to obtain. Data was requested from operators at the start of the assessment process (June 2017) but was not forthcoming. An appeal to the Traffic Commissioner was required and a ruling was not received until over a year later. More recent experience post-COVID suggests that operators are now becoming more accustomed to sharing data with LTAs and government, however, greater clarity as to expectations (e.g. level of detail, format, timescales) and enforcement rights within the legislation could provide helpful reassurance²².
- 5.9 Further standardised open book data requirement for operators could also be introduced to simplify and de-risk the franchising journey, ensuring LTAs have the data

²⁰ UTG (2023) A Smoother Ride - Reviewing the Bus Services Act 2017 to empower local areas

²¹ DfT (2017) The Bus Services Act 2017

²² UTG (2023) A Smoother Ride - Reviewing the Bus Services Act 2017 to empower local areas



and information they need from operators (at the right level of detail and in the right format) when they need it, backed by an enforcement regime.

Improve LTA capacity

5.10 Overall LTA transport team capacity has declined over time due to a shortage of qualified individuals and reliance on long-service staff members approaching retirement²³. There is therefore an expectation that the main gaps will be filled through outsourcing and consultancy support. Further support in addressing staff capacity must be considered to ensure LTAs can undertake franchising in a manner that rebuilds their capacity and ensures value for money.

Simplify and devolve funding

5.11 Support provided to bus operators from local and central government, typically amounts to around 40 per cent of total revenues, although during the height of the COVID epidemic, rose as high as 70 per cent for a short period of time²⁴. A substantial part of the tax-payer derived support is to cover the costs of concessionary travel, so is better understood as a fare subsidy for passengers. Another portion of it derives from LTAs offering tenders to run services that otherwise would not be run commercially, so again is not a straightforward subsidy. And finally, Bus Service Operator Grant (BSOG) provides operators with financial support linked to their fuel costs. Noting the complexity of the current regime of revenue support, the actual direct public subsidy into bus service provision is relatively modest. LGA analysis conducted in 2023 found that the DfT spends more than £4.50 on subsidising rail passenger services for every £1 it spends on bus subsidy²⁵.

5.12 Current funding arrangements are far from the model of certainty that LTAs require to progress with EPs or franchising and invest in vital bus infrastructure. Sufficient and predictable funding, applied in a progressive manner, year-on-year would both drive down costs and provide better services to the passenger. Timescale and cost challenges due to overly complex processes and incomplete powers are further compounded by restrictive, siloed and piecemeal funding pots. This puts further pressure on local authorities to retrofit their ambitions to make these fit with national funding pot conditions and limitations.

5.13 For authorities embarking on franchising, having full control and accountability for a simplified and overarching funding pot would enable them to focus on delivering the desired local outcomes of improved services and the corresponding economic and societal benefits. This would give confidence to elected decision makers locally and

²³ DfT (2021) National Bus Strategy: Capacity and Capability

²⁴ Bus Expert Roundtable, DfT June 2022, data from the University of Southampton

²⁵ LGA (2023) Thousands of bus routes at risk amid funding uncertainty, News Release 16/02/23



centrally, as well as Treasury and the DfT, that every penny spent goes directly towards delivering better services and outcomes.

- 5.14 Therefore, we believe, that fair, transparent and timely allocation of funding that reflects local need and seeks to reduce regional inequalities must be established. The current siloed, competition-based or overly restrictive funding pots must be reviewed to move to a single devolved, long-term and simple capital and revenue funding stream for bus. This should ultimately become a part of a devolved long-term transport settlement that supports integrated transport planning.

Support for franchised networks

- 5.15 Currently, franchising legislation significantly limits LTAs' ability to make changes to the franchised bus network in their area without delay. The option for scheme variation within existing franchises should be introduced to give LTAs more flexibility to implement network changes over time, without the need for time consuming statutory variation mechanisms.
- 5.16 Furthermore, currently, the only way for LTAs to be able to prosecute fare evaders is for the franchise operators to give their consent and nominate LTA officers as inspectors under their operating licence. LTAs should be given prosecution powers.
- 5.17 Similarly, franchising authorities cannot currently introduce byelaws to tackle anti-social behaviour both on vehicle and within bus stations and at bus stops. Franchising authorities must be given their own powers to introduce byelaws to effectively tackle ASB on the bus network in the same way they can enforce such behaviour on the light rail network.

6 Further issues for Wales to be aware of

- 6.1 Within the franchising model, the transfer of powers and revenues from a deregulated market back to a public body is complex and presents risks. The risks will become clearer as more areas take up these powers. But through learning and exchange these risks should also be reduced. Below we briefly highlight some of the key risks Welsh decisionmakers ought to be aware of in the scrutiny of Welsh franchising plans.

Revenue risk

- 6.2 Revenue risk is an important consideration for any area planning on progressing with bus franchising. If fare income falls and operating costs rise, it is the Transport Authority assuming the direct revenue risk.
- 6.3 However, all authorities in England embarking on the franchising journey have concluded that "they cannot afford not to franchise"²⁶. In the case of Liverpool, for

²⁶ [Bus Franchising Final.pdf \(greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk\)](#)



example, about 15% of the services in the region have been deemed commercially unviable by operators and rely on subsidy from the local authority to run, costing about £14m a year²⁷ Greater Manchester, following the introduction of tranche one of franchising in the region, have concluded that to date, the costs for franchise contracts have been competitive, particularly when compared to the costs of tendering individual services²⁸.

- 6.4 Franchising also enables both public and private stakeholders to have 'skin in the game,' which is important for incentives and collaborative working. Highways authorities have an important role to play in supporting the smooth running of bus services, including through the provision of bus priority infrastructure, which can reduce the operating costs of services.
- 6.5 In the longer term it is important to note that smarter funding and financing models for fleets will be needed. Particularly for the transition to Zero Emission Bus (ZEB) fleets. The availability of commercial financing for buses is limited and smaller operators as well as transport authorities find it difficult to afford the significant upfront costs.

Need for investment

- 6.6 The results of bus franchising in London over the last two decades are extremely impressive. But this transformation has required very significant, ongoing investment in the bus system over many years.
- 6.7 Outside of London, many areas' deregulated bus networks have seen significant underinvestment over the same period. In order to bring these systems up to the same standard as the UK capital, significant additional investment (both capital and revenue) is likely to be required.

Operators' sustainability

- 6.8 A further risk to be aware of is the long-term sustainability of operators, even in a franchised network. This includes their viability to update fleet and assets and cover the cost of capital. This is particularly significant given plans for fleet decarbonisation. Similarly, the increasing level of skills shortage in the sector will continue to present a challenge to operators and the franchise authority.

Sustaining networks

- 6.9 A clear risk in the managing the transition to the Proposed Franchising Scheme also must be noted. Given the length of the franchising process, a risk of service deregistration in the transition period is present. If there were significant withdrawals of services, this would require the transport authority to provide a significant number of

²⁷ LCRCA (April 2023) Bus Franchising in the Liverpool City Region: assessment

²⁸ [Bus Franchising Final.pdf \(greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk\)](#)



interim services. There is thus a balance to be struck between reducing the adverse impact on introduction of the Proposed Franchising Scheme of operators deregistering services quickly, impacting the bus network, and the instability that this would create, and any potential adverse impact on any operator running the service.

- 6.10 Approaches to de-risking the transition period should be explored, learning lessons from Greater Manchester's experience.

SMEs

- 6.11 The last few years has been difficult for SMEs in the market, given the uncertainty of future funding, the cost of transitioning to zero-emission vehicles and capacity constraints²⁹. SMEs have also been vocal about their concerns in the lead up to franchising across England³⁰.
- 6.12 In response to these concerns, Greater Manchester set up small bus franchise lots aimed at SME operators, also setting out how, in conducting the procurement process for the provision of local services, the authority will facilitate the involvement of small and medium sized operators³¹.
- 6.13 The bus reform assessment published by WYCA states that the 'lotting' process that it expects to adopt – which will utilise large lots and small lots – is aimed at promoting competition and enabling SMEs³². This includes a gradual move to franchising with the smaller lots, including an initial letting of contracts on “substantially the same basis” as current gross-cost supported services.
- 6.14 Issues around long-term uncertainty can be overcome if long term certainty over funding plans for buses is provided by central governments, including assisting with the transition to zero-emission, while franchising authorities can make it simpler for SMEs to bid and give support in procurement.

Cross boundary services

- 6.15 Provision of cross boundary services is an issue facing all areas progressing franchising in England.
- 6.16 Under franchising, operators are required to apply to the franchise authority for a Service Permit to run bus services into the area. The permits require operators to meet the area's operational standards (e.g. environmental, accessibility, safety etc), provide

²⁹ Passenger Transport (2022) The ALBUM Report 2022

³⁰ [West Yorkshire bus franchising worry for SME operators is aired - routeone \(route-one.net\)](#)

³¹ GMCA (September 2019) Commercial Case Market Engagement Supporting Paper

³² WYCA (March 2024) Bus Reform Assessment



appropriate levels of passenger information that can integrate with the local systems (e.g. real time information) and accept and sell LTA tickets within the area's boundary.

- 6.17 Services seeking a permit must also be judged to benefit bus passengers within the local area and not have an adverse effect on franchised services. This approach is in place and working well in relation to cross boundary services to/from the Tranche 1 area in Greater Manchester³³.
- 6.18 To a larger extent this is an approach that Wales is likely to need to take for its cross boundary services. We would urge early cooperation and engagement with neighbouring English authorities and the operators providing the cross-boundary services as the franchising scheme is developed.
- 6.19 UTG would be happy to further support the committee in its inquiry, including by providing further detail on the points raised above or providing oral evidence in further stages of the enquiry.

³³ [Bus Franchising Final.pdf \(greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk\)](#)