

## **Senedd Cymru Committee on Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure: Bus Franchising**

### **Submission of Transport for Greater Manchester**

**Stephen Rhodes, Director of Bus, April 2024**

### **Bus Franchising – Greater Manchester’s Experience**

As the first place in the United Kingdom to use the powers in the Bus Services Act 2017 and the first place outside of London to run franchised bus services, Greater Manchester is uniquely well-placed to describe the benefits and opportunities of franchising, as well as some of the challenges inherent to a structural change of this magnitude.

#### **Context**

Buses are a critical part of Greater Manchester’s transport system, but they have not been performing to their full potential for many years.

In the almost four decades since deregulation, bus journeys in Greater Manchester fell, from around 355 million in 1986 to 182 million in 2019. The bus network also shrank in this period: in 1977, buses here travelled 137 million kilometres, compared to 85 million kilometres in 2022.

If Greater Manchester is to meet its target of carbon neutrality by 2038 and deliver on its ambitions for a fairer and more prosperous city region, our bus system will need to carry more people for more journeys.

A rigorous assessment of the bus system set out that bus franchising – i.e. local control of routes, fares and service levels and the ability to integrate buses with other transport modes – would provide the biggest benefits for Greater Manchester. In March 2021, the Mayor of Greater Manchester made the decision to implement bus franchising here.

#### **Transition**

Greater Manchester is now seven months into franchised bus operations, with around half the conurbation’s bus network franchised and the remaining 50% due to be franchised in January 2025. This has been a very significant undertaking, with the public sector taking control of 10 large bus depots and procuring hundreds of vehicles.

It has also required a huge effort by operators (both incoming and outgoing) and their staff to support an orderly transition to the new arrangements that ensures services are maintained for the travelling public.

Greater Manchester has worked hard to minimise disruption during this period of change but the complexities of moving to a franchised system are significant.

### **Current position**

Franchised services in Greater Manchester are now, on average, more punctual than they were in the equivalent period twelve months ago and are regularly outperforming services on the non-franchised network.

Patronage on franchised services has grown steadily, with more than 250,000 passengers being carried each weekday, and nearly 290,000 on some days.

Revenue for franchised services has continued to exceed forecast. Revenue increased further throughout February and year to date was 24% above budget. However, increased revenue is being offset by higher than anticipated costs.

Since January 2024, TfGM has publicly reported Bee Network bus performance every week on its website, for services that have been franchised since September 2023. In the most recent report:

- In the week 7 to 13 April: more Bee Network bus services were on time compared to both non-franchised and pre-franchised services (in the same period last year)
- In the six weeks ending 13 April: in every week, Bee Network services were more punctual than they were in the equivalent period pre-franchising; and
- In every week, Bee Network services were more punctual than non-franchised services in GM.

### **Initial interventions**

On routes where performance has been particularly poor, franchising has allowed TfGM to make changes to timetables and improve reliability for bus users. Changes of this kind have been made in both January and April 2024.

We are also acting on customer feedback:

- Some changes to service numbers have come into effect to make the network easier to understand.
- Further updates to the app, including journey planning and bus tracking.

## Developing the network

In the future, local control means that elected members, residents and other stakeholders will rightly expect the network to do more to support the city region's policy priorities and longer-term ambitions.

In July 2023, we published our [Bus Strategy](#), which set out how we want to use our newly franchised bus system to support Greater Manchester in the future. Our key targets by 2030 are:

- A 30% increase in bus patronage from 2022/23 levels, with Bee Network targets to be confirmed through the Local Transport Plan process.
- For buses to run at least every 12 minutes on key orbital and radial routes.
- To provide 90% of the entire Greater Manchester population with a 30-minute frequency bus or Metrolink service on weekdays within 400m of their home. Other options (e.g. Demand Response Transport) will be put in place in parts of the city region where this is not possible.
- To deliver on-street bus improvements across 70km of high frequency, strategic bus routes across Greater Manchester.
- To keep fares as low as possible across the Bee Network and reinvest any surplus back into the transport system.

Network Reviews are the mechanism through which Greater Manchester will develop its bus network in a coordinated, planned and consistent manner, as part of the wider Bee Network – our integrated transport system.

Operational changes can (and have) been introduced outside of this process, but where network or strategic changes are required, it is the intention that we will use the Network Review process to ensure consistency and accountability.

The first Network Review – of services in the Bolton area – is already underway.