



Unite response to Department for Transport consultation on proposed changes to bus franchising guidance

Introduction

This submission is made by Unite, Britain and Ireland's largest union with over 1 million members across all sectors of the economy including **transport**, manufacturing, financial services, food and agriculture, construction, energy and utilities, information technology, service industries, health, local government and the not for profit sector. Unite also organises in the community, enabling those who are not in employment to be part of our union.

In the arena of transport Unite represents **a quarter of a million members in all transport modes**, making it the largest transport union in the UK. Unite is the dominant union in the buses sector with some 60,000 members.

Unite has obtained the views of our **passenger transport** members through our lay member committees and is therefore in a unique position to submit a response to this consultation.

Unite does not disagree with any of the proposed changes as outlined in the specific questions. However, we are keen to ensure that key points about how this fits into a 'plan for better buses' do not get overlooked and are properly considered (see below).

We would be happy to discuss further any of the points raised in this response.

Responses to questions

Do you agree or disagree with the proposal to lower the consent threshold that LTAs are required to meet to prepare a bus franchising scheme assessment and why?

Do you have any other comments on the consent threshold that LTAs are required to meet to prepare a franchising scheme assessment?

Do you agree or disagree with the proposal to revise the approach to the option identification and why?

Do you have any other comments on the proposal to revise the approach to option identification?

Do you agree or disagree with the proposed changes to reduce the content LTAs need to provide in the franchise assessment and why?

Do you have any other comments on the proposed changes to the franchise assessment?

Unite does not disagree with any of the proposed changes as outlined above. However, we are keen to ensure that key points about how this fits into a 'plan for better buses' do not get overlooked and are properly considered (see further below).

Do you agree or disagree with the addition of the section entitled 'putting people at the heart of franchising' and why?

Unite does not disagree with the proposed change outlined above. However, we are keen to ensure that key points about how this fits into a 'plan for better buses' do not get overlooked or properly considered.

In respect of '**Personal safety**' we welcome the need to give particular regard to groups with protected characteristics and to tackling Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG).

In February 2022 Unite commissioned a Survation poll to look at issues impacting safe travel. The UK poll revealed heightened public concern over transport safety where:

- 55% said reduced bus services affected how safe they felt when travelling in their local area at night;
- 40% identified that there had been cuts to local bus services;
- 49% confirmed there were no adequate local bus services which were safe, affordable and well lit.

Unite’s ‘Get Me Home Safely’ campaign¹, developed by the Passenger Transport and Hospitality sectors of our union sets out key solutions to tackle these concerns, some of which are listed below from a bus perspective:

- i. Address the weakness in enforcement of the law against sexual assault and harassment on public transport;
- ii. Additional bus routes to tackle the chronic shortage of night services;
- iii. Mandatory training for transport workers on gender based violence to include practical guidance on report sexual harassment and assault on public transport.

Unite believes these points should be incorporated into the discussions around franchising.

In respect of **‘Driver welfare standards’** we welcome the acknowledgement of the importance of access to appropriate toilet facilities on bus routes wherever possible rather than just at depots and that franchising authorities *“should seek views and advice from bus sector employees working in the area covered by the franchising scheme, including relevant trade unions, in developing their approach to this issue”* (pages 16-17).

Unite has long campaigned for ‘toilet dignity for all’ believing that “when nature calls getting access to decent toilet and hand washing facilities shouldn’t be a lottery”².

In fact, this isn’t the only issue in which the **experience of people working within the bus sector and their trade unions** should be included. The knowledge which workers have acquired should be utilised with their agreement when conceiving and designing all aspects of bus networks.

What, if any, suggestions do you have on how the franchising guidance could better:

- **support the delivery of the government’s missions**
- **promote the government’s objectives?**

Do you have comments on any other parts of the guidance?

¹ <https://www.unitetheunion.org/campaigns/get-me-home-safely-campaign>

² <https://www.unitetheunion.org/campaigns/toilet-dignity>

The acknowledgement that *“the current system where services are predominantly run on a commercial basis and bus operators decide on the routes and provision is not delivering for communities across England”* (page 1) is welcome and long overdue.

Since the bus industry was deregulated in the 1980s, **Unite has actively lobbied for public ownership of the bus system as the way forward for a fully integrated, reliable and cost-effective world class bus system that puts bus workers, passengers and communities at the forefront of bus strategy.**

Unite has long been committed to a policy of full public ownership of buses and we see this as the best way for the bus system to operate in the interests of passengers, communities, the environment and the wider economy. Unite sees little benefit to bus users, communities or workers in private companies cherry picking routes to provide profits to pay to shareholders while fares rise, bus routes are withdrawn and the terms and conditions of workers in the industry are eroded.

Public ownership of our buses would create a more integrated network of properly regulated bus services which would be run for the benefit of passengers rather than to provide excess profits for operating companies. It would lead to greater accountability, improved reliability and better value for money.

Whilst striving towards the ultimate goal of public ownership, the use of ‘franchising’, made possible by the Bus Services Act 2017, was an opportunity to repair some of the damage done by deregulation and give more control to communities. We see this very much as a potential staging post for transition to public ownership.

However, more needs to be done on articulating what a franchising model actually looks like.

We have previously argued that automatic powers to franchise bus services should not be limited to Combined Authorities with directly elected mayors. Municipalisation of bus services should be an option available to all local authorities.

The franchising model must not lock out the option of public ownership nor must public ownership be shoe-horned into a franchising mode like any other company.

How does 'route by route' work with an area network approach and how is proper integration ensured? These are critical questions that need to be answered as they directly impact on the functionality and evolution of a franchising model, as well as the openness of the tendering process and the transfer of affected staff.

However, we think that franchising offers more benefits than enhanced partnerships. Our past experience of partnerships has been disappointing. Trade unions were not consulted when partnerships were formed and often operators abandoned the partnerships citing commercial reasons and faced no penalties.

There needs to be **decent standards for Local Transport Authorities to assess and deliver on** local transport needs. These should include workers' terms and conditions, including pensions and are as important to driver welfare and the Public Sector Equality Duty as infrastructure design and safe travel. Terms and conditions must not just be protected but enhanced.

We are keen that proper consideration is given to **learning lessons from experiences** such as in Manchester, West Yorkshire, London, Reading and Wales to **develop best practice**.

Fundamentally enhanced partnerships, franchising and public ownership should not be seen as mutually exclusive options for Local Transport Authorities to adopt for specific geographic areas or corridors. They should be the means by which an LTA can provide an efficient, sustainable and integrated transport network which can be operated with real value for the relevant local authorities. Therefore the all option could and should be used alongside each other.

Zero emission buses can deliver big savings on bus operating costs which can be reinvested to improve services and ultimately lower fares and deliver a better service for customers.

Beyond the physical decarbonising strategies, there must be **better integration of buses with other modes of transport** – with integrated electronic ticketing and more bus routes serving railway stations and improved integration with cycling and walking routes and networks to reduce the need for private car use and better connect community to services.

While the take up of zero emission buses is crucial to reducing the carbon footprint of the sector, there is an imbalance between the costs of bus fares in different regions. Making transport affordable and accessible to all is fundamentally important to increasing ridership and will reduce emissions from private car use.

Ultimately a holistic approach is needed for developing solutions to decarbonise buses and reach zero emissions within target dates. Such solutions must consider working conditions of bus workers. Unite believes the long term operating cost savings should also be put towards improving pay and conditions and upskilling bus workers.

Finally, a model of public ownership will in turn allow **a procurement strategy which can support UK bus manufacturing.** The UK has the largest ZEV (zero emission vehicles) bus market by volume in Europe, with manufacturing capacity to supply all types of ZEV models. In the first half of 2024 almost a quarter (23.2%) of all new vehicle purchases were ZEV³. Publicly owned bus companies must take advantage of funding, such as the ZEBRA scheme (Zero Emission Bus Regional Area), to decarbonise fleets and further support UK bus manufacturing.

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³ <https://www.smmmt.co.uk/2024/08/bus-investment-grows-again-with-greenest-rollout-in-europe/>

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