

North East Public Transport Users Group: response to North East Bus Franchising Scheme consultation, September 2026.

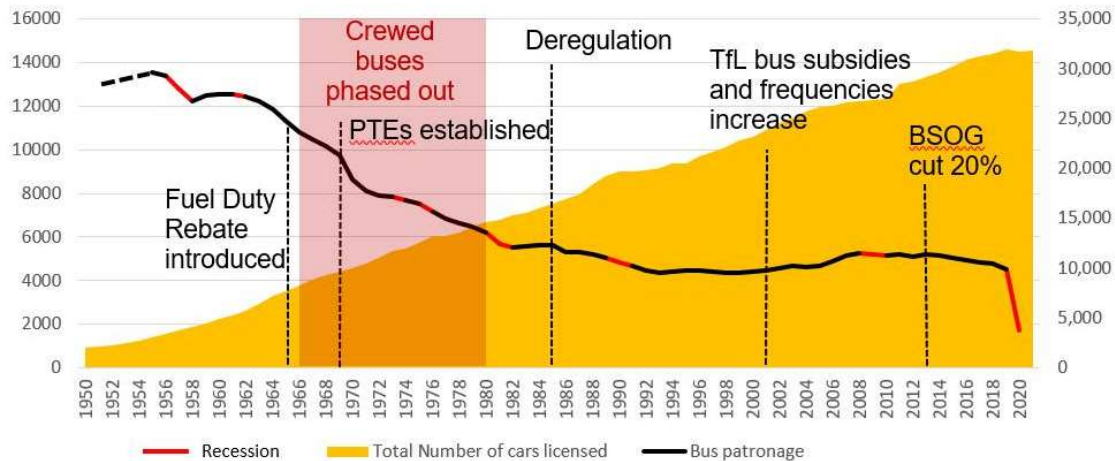
The North East Public Transport Users Group (NEPTUG) is a voluntary organisation that campaigns on behalf of current and future users of public transport (including walking and cycling) in the region. NEPTUG believe that a re-regulated, integrated, accessible, reliable, safe, and affordable public transport service is the way to enable, rather than encourage, people to change travel behaviour to reduce their use of private cars, and thus tackle the economic, social, and environmental problems created by our current transport mix. We have campaigned for over a decade to make the case to local authorities and transport providers in the region to develop a transport system that enables people to choose the most sustainable mode of transport for their journey, not be locked into car dependency.

NEPTUG welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on bus franchising in the region, and congratulates Mayor Kim McGuinness and the North East MSA for bringing this forward. We see this as an important step in the return to an integrated public transport system in our region, allowing seamless ticketing across all modes, bus services that link with Metro and rail services, improved access for those with disabilities, better waiting facilities, and clearer information for passengers. We fully support the proposed Franchising Scheme and are excited to be part of the journey towards a public transport system that works for people and planet, not profit.

Isolation and frustration – problems with the current bus service model

NEPTUG is a member organisation, and we often hear from our members about problems with bus services across the boroughs of the North East. Whether it's young people in Wooler being unable to go to the theatre in Berwick because they can't get home again by bus, residents of South Shields campaigning to stop the loss of the bus service to their local hospital, the residents of South West Durham struggling to get anywhere but Bishop Auckland, or the people of Heaton complaining about four number 1 buses coming along in a convoy, people know that buses don't work for people.

This isn't what was promised in 1986 when bus services were deregulated. We were told that the private sector would increase innovation, improve services, and that more people would choose to use the bus. The last four decades have seen a marked drop in the coverage of bus services, with a corresponding drop in patronage outside of London. At the same time, car ownership has grown significantly, with millions more vehicles on the road since the 1980s (see graph below). Ironically, the major cause of delay and disruption for bus services is traffic congestion, trapping us in a vicious spiral where more cars lead to less reliable and slower buses, which leads to more people buying cars to get around, which leads to even slower bus services. In the towns and cities of the North East, buses often move at walking pace and timetable updates from operators almost always lead to slower journeys (often citing "operational difficulties").



This general picture of decline has very real consequences on people's lives. We regularly hear from our members about the unreliability of bus services, of buses vanishing from the timetable with no explanation, of routes being cut or altered with only a few weeks' notice when people have chosen jobs and built lives around bus services. We hear about difficulties finding information, about confusing apps, about tickets not valid on other services, people changing buses forced to wait for long periods because timetables don't join up, and about people standing at stops in the pouring rain with no shelter. When things do go wrong, there's nobody to call, and nobody accountable. The private operators seem immune to complaints and beholden to nobody.

These issues aren't just an inconvenience. For many people in our region, the bus is the only way they can get to school, get to the shops, attend hospital appointments, have social connections, or hold down a job. In our cities, around 40% of people don't have access to a car, so the loss of a bus service means a loss of opportunity. When buses are unreliable or infrequent, it isn't just an inconvenience, it quietly limits people's opportunities and, over time, entrenches deprivation in exactly the communities that can least afford it. The most important thing is that buses run to time and get people where they want to be quickly. For this, we need buses to run in conjunction with local authority planning, ensuring they have the infrastructure to operate in a way that underpins our local economy, gives people access to opportunity, and thus tackles social and environmental issues inherent in rising car use.

Why we support franchising: the five key benefits for bus users

There are five key aspects of public transport that NEPTUG campaign on in the North East:

1. Accountability
2. Reliability
3. Affordability
4. Accessibility
5. Safety

We believe that the proposed Bus Franchising Scheme will address many of the problems with the region's current bus system and help move us towards the integrated public transport system that we want to see in the North East. By doing so, we hope that public transport will become the obvious choice to travel around our region.

Accountability: one of the driving forces behind declining bus services in the region is a lack of accountability of operators to the people who rely on their services, and to the taxpayers who fund half of the costs of every bus service in this country. The public pays for buses, relies on buses, but has no say in the way those buses are run and no formal means to influence decisions to put up fares, alter timetables, or change or cancel routes.

For us, the Franchising Scheme risks repeating these failures if it replaces one top-down, corporate, privately-run system with another top-down, publicly-run system. Some would argue that putting buses under control of the North East MSA with oversight from officers and local elected officials is sufficient, but that will only be the case if those in control actually rely on the buses they are managing and have day-to-day insight into issues and an understanding of the network, the missed connections, the pinchpoints, and the limits placed on people's lives.

As such, NEPTUG feels very strongly that the Bus Franchising Scheme must increase **accountability** of bus services to their passengers, ensuring that the voice of bus users can be heard in a formal, democratic, open forum and decisions about the network on which they rely can be scrutinised and challenged. Clearly, as the North East's only democratic organisation representing users of all public transport modes, we believe that we have a strong role to play in ensuring that passenger engagement and accountability of operators is baked into the new system from the outset, truly ensuring that bus services are designed with people, not inflicted upon them.

Reliability: as much as the speed of bus services is important, especially when competing with the private car, it is the reliability of the service that matters most to users. If passengers can rely on a service being on time and arriving at the destination stated in the timetable, then they can plan lives around it. They don't have to catch a bus half an hour earlier just to ensure they get to work or an appointment on time, meaning they might miss out on seeing the kids to school or having breakfast with the family.

The report by Prof David Begg 'The Impact of Congestion on Bus Passengers' outlined the impact that traffic congestion, caused by too many private cars on the network, has on bus users. Bus journey times have increased by almost 50% in congested urban areas, and little has been done to protect bus journeys from that congestion. In some places buses travel at almost walking speed, as highlighted by a recent report on London¹. This congestion has a cost for bus services, requiring more vehicles and drivers to maintain a frequent service, and thus a cost for passengers through higher fares to pay for extra wages and buses.

We therefore call on the North East MSA to, in parallel with the move towards a franchised delivery model, roll out a comprehensive network of bus priority corridors across the region. This vision was set out in the BSIP funding bid that awarded £163.5 million to the region but which has led to little meaningful change to the amount of dedicated bus infrastructure. In fact, important schemes such as the Coast Road bus corridor between North Tyneside and Newcastle have been shelved, leaving buses and their passengers crawling along in long queues of private cars at peak times, meaning the bus is a deeply unattractive option. Why would you sit in a queue of cars on a bus when you could sit in a queue of cars in your own vehicle? A bus priority lane would serve as a carrot and a stick, speeding up bus services to provide an attractive alternative to driving at the same time as making car drivers wait in their own queue, watching the buses fly by.

Finally, for rural services time is often added to the timetable by buses diverting from the main road to enter every village, often battling through narrow streets with parked cars. We believe parking should be

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/ng-interactive/2026/sep/23/london-buses-in-terminal-decline-why-public-transport-in-global-cities-is-slowing-to-a-crawl-visualised>

managed to prioritise bus services where possible across the region, with better bus services offering an incentive for households to reduce the number of cars they own. We would also like to see consideration given to the Danish model of safe cycle storage at bus stops and connected cycling infrastructure in rural areas, allowing residents of local villages to cycle safely to the bus stop on the main road to leave their bike, instead of every bus having to enter the village.

The proposed Bus Franchising Scheme offers an opportunity to prioritise bus journey time, speeding up key corridors through bus priority. But it also offers an opportunity to put mechanisms in place to ensure that punctuality is taken seriously. Financial penalties for late services and incentives for good performance would ensure that bus passengers could rely on services to get them where they need to be on time.

Affordability: the current ticketing system in the North East is confusing and archaic. Whilst the Mayor's Fare £2.50 cap has been extremely welcome, and the £1 under-21 tickets have made travel more attractive for young people, travelling by public transport is still unnecessarily complex and expensive. Compare this to London, where franchised services offer tap-on with contactless bank cards, flat £1.65 fares for travel on multiple buses within an hour, and automatic integrated ticketing if the same card is used to travel on Underground or local rail services. We deserve the same opportunity here.

The Franchising Scheme offers an opportunity to simplify and reduce fares. Manchester's bus tickets cost £2 and increased ridership and reduced costs due to lower congestion could make a similar fare affordable here. Obviously, some of our rural bus services cover very long distances so thought must be given to fares for these journeys, but ultimately we would like to see buses linking with trains where possible to enable rural connectivity without very long travel times. This is why integration between modes is so important.

Accessibility: we are pleased that accessibility is included in the objectives of the Bus Franchising Scheme assessment. For many of our members and the travelling public, the bus is a lifeline and they only way they can get around. It's vital that buses are accessible to all, allowing older people, wheelchair users, people with visual or hearing impairments, young people, and cycle users to travel without barriers. We believe the proposed Franchising Scheme offers an opportunity for the application of consistent accessibility standards across the whole network rather than leaving it to individual operators' fleet decisions, as happens now.

As well as buses, it is also important that the supporting infrastructure of bus stations, stops and shelters is accessible. In a world of changing climate and increased extreme weather events, whether they be heatwaves or heavy rainfall, the humble bus shelter plays a vital role. As it stands, the quality and coverage of bus shelters across the seven local authorities is inconsistent and patchy. There are shelters in Gateshead that have never had the electricity for their lighting connected. There are shelters in Newcastle that have been barricaded by large red and white plastic blocks for over 18 months for fear they might collapse on passengers. There are shelters in North Tyneside that don't even have a bus stop flag attached.

We hope that the delivery of good quality bus shelters, of clean and safe bus interchanges **with public toilets**, that the provision of a consistent, decent standard across the region, including at the busy interchanges that feed people into Newcastle, Sunderland and Durham, is a priority from the outset of the scheme. We also hope that bus infrastructure across the region will have a consistent 'look and feel', so people feel like they're travelling on one joined-up network. It is disappointing to see that brand new bus stations in Durham and Bishop Auckland don't have the Calvert 'B' bus logo despite being part of the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority.

Accessibility also included the provision of information. Technology exists for clear, digital displays to be included at every bus stop that is updated with real-time information about upcoming services. This information is vital, ensuring that passengers aren't reliant on confusing apps, or forced to own a smartphone to know if their bus is running on time. This information, alongside that on the buses themselves, must be accessible to those with visual impairments including clear next stop announcements and information about connections with other modes at key stops.

Finally, accessibility is as much about attitudes as it is about technology and equipment. Training for bus drivers in protecting and assisting people with disabilities is vital to remove barriers to travel and ensure passengers are treated with respect and dignity, regardless of their abilities. We would like to see a consistent driver training standard included in franchising tenders, ensuring that all drivers are able to look after their passengers in an appropriate way and make everyone feel welcome on the region's buses.

Safety: feeling unsafe on public transport is something that puts people off using it, especially at night and especially for women and girls. Antisocial behaviour in bus stations, broken windows in bus shelters, intimidating passengers on services, or being forced to change buses in isolated areas, are all reasons why some people feel unsafe travelling by bus. The Franchising Scheme names passenger safety as a key concern, and safety of women and girls is a priority for the Mayor, so we hope that the proposals will ensure that everyone feels safe on bus services in the region. This will require more staff (e.g. on-bus inspectors and staff at bus stations) and not just more CCTV, which does little to deter offenders or protect people during incidents.

Again, we would like to see improved training for bus drivers on protecting passengers. We realise that drivers are often put in an impossible position if there are incidents on their vehicle, but putting systems in place that allow them to divert to locations where police can intervene or where additional support can be dispatched (e.g. the 61016 'See It, Say it, Sorted' campaign on the railways) would help reassure people that travelling by bus is safe. Training could include bystander training for harassment to ensure that drivers know when to intervene when inappropriate behaviour is taking place on their bus, or that passengers know reporting incidents to the driver will result in action being taken.

Concluding Remarks

NEPTUG applauds the North East Combined Authority for bringing forward this Franchising Scheme proposal and we firmly believe that this will help to arrest the decline in bus services in our region. We hope that the accountability, affordability, reliability, accessibility, and safety of bus services will all improve under these proposals, especially if the comments above are taken into account.

There are obviously financial and commercial arrangements to be worked out but we feel that locking in commercial providers into a 6 to 8 year contract gives security and longevity to the arrangements. These contracts must include clauses to manage performance of operators, penalise poor punctuality or reliability, or terminate contracts if operators don't meet standards. We hope that smaller operators with smaller vehicles are able to bid into these contracts, especially in rural areas, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach with large double-deckers running every service.

We also hope that, alongside improving the lives of bus passengers, the Bus Franchising Scheme proposals will improve the lives of the bus drivers on which they rely. We applaud the commitment to paying the living wage to drivers and staff, but we also hope they will have a say in services and that their experience and knowledge will help deliver a stronger network. Thank you for taking the time to read our response. We look forward to seeing the outcomes and playing our role in the improvement of bus services in our region.

North East Public Transport Users Group, 27th of September 2026 hello@neptug.org.uk