STRENGTHENING SCOTLAND'S BUS NETWORK

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Briefing from Transform Scotland

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Key Points.

- Welcomes greater public accountability for bus services. But **bus reform should concentrate on empowering local/regional transport authorities** to implement new institutional arrangements that suit their circumstances.
- Agrees that affordability is important, and **the £2 bus fares cap is a bold measure – but we have a number of concerns**, including distributional effects and impacts on the nationalised railway.
- Notes that the motion does not explicitly address bus priority, journey times, service reliability, or additional investment in infrastructure. This is a significant omission given that the available evidence demonstrates that **traffic & congestion — not institutional arrangements — remain the primary negative influence on bus patronage**.

1. Bus reform should be pursued on a local/regional basis.

Transform Scotland welcomes stronger public accountability for bus services. However, franchising, municipal operation and bus service improvement partnerships should be regarded as alternative delivery mechanisms, selected according to local/regional circumstances. **Strathclyde's experience differs from Edinburgh, where the publicly-owned Lothian Buses has maintained a successful integrated network and strong patronage.**

Imposing a single model across Scotland risks undermining effective existing arrangements. Equally, transport authorities wishing to franchise services must have the powers, expertise and resources to proceed efficiently.

In the **West of Scotland**, SPT is already several years into planning franchising arrangements. So revisions to the franchising setup could conceivably set back SPT's progress here. There is certainly limited appetite for franchising to be taken forward in **South-East Scotland**. The region already enjoys:

- A highly-successful bus company in Lothian Buses – commercially-operated, publicly-owned but not publicly-controlled.
- Increasing patronage, unlike most of the rest of Scotland.

Franchising would pose a threat to the success of the Lothian model – and, if badly-managed, could lead to the fragmentation of its service. The other five Regional Transport Partnerships (**Nestrans, Hitrans, Tactran, SWestrans, ZetTrans**) already have the powers and funding required to take forward franchising should they determine that this is what they want to pursue. What may work in Strathclyde is unlikely to work in Edinburgh – and may or may not be appropriate around the rest of the country. Our understanding is that **Sestran, Nestrans & Hitrans have decided to pursue a partnership approach**. What is lacking is that while the Government has published guidance on other items (e.g. municipal operation, bus franchising), it has still not published Statutory BSIP guidance seven years after the 2019 Transport Act.

Government should give transport authorities the tools, resources and expertise to choose the model that works best for their area — and then hold them accountable for delivering the network. **The test of reform must be better outcomes for passengers: faster journeys, greater reliability, wider coverage, improved accessibility and increased patronage**.

2. Affordability is also important, and the £2 fares cap is a bold measure – but we have a number of concerns.

There is widespread evidence, whether from the public, private or third sectors, that **traffic & congestion remain the primary negative influence on bus use**. But affordability is also important, and Scotland's public transport is far more expensive than in many continental countries. For example:

- **£1,209** — central **Glasgow** – all public transport
- **£1,161** (€1,400) — all of **Austria** – all public transport
- **£627** (€756) — all of **Germany** – all local/regional public transport

So something needs to be done – and **a £2 fare cap is a bold and positive intervention**. But key questions include:

Who will benefit?

Our analysis of the **under-22s** travel scheme has identified that investment in the scheme purchases a much greater benefit for young people in **Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Dundee, Midlothian and East Lothian** than for those who live in **South Lanarkshire, Aberdeenshire, Moray, Orkney and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar**. The government's recent evaluation of the older and disabled persons scheme identified a similar lack of equity for this cohort. The central issue is that a national entitlement does not produce an equal transport benefit when the underlying network varies substantially. **A free bus pass has limited value if there is no useful bus to use it on.**

Will it generate genuinely additional journeys?

There appears to only be weak evidence that it has done this in England.

Will journeys transfer from rail to bus?

We understand the Highlands & Highlands scheme is already leading to abstraction from ScotRail patronage – and given that ScotRail is state-owned, the government will be funding new bus journeys – *mostly operated by privately-owned operators* – while requiring to backfill ScotRail revenue shortfall through increased subsidy. In effect, Government is having to pay twice in this instance.

The £2 bus fare cap is certainly a bold policy. However, cheap fares are of little value where there is no useful bus service. The benefits of fare subsidies vary considerably between communities with extensive networks and those with limited services. **The £2 pilots should therefore be independently evaluated against additional patronage, car-to-bus modal shift, impacts on ScotRail revenue, operator reimbursement and effects on service provision.** Government should consider region-specific objectives and funding packages rather than assume a uniform national subsidy will deliver equitable outcomes.

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Scotland's alliance for sustainable transport

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We campaign for walking, cycling and public transport to be the easiest and most affordable options for everyone. Our diverse membership brings together public, private and third sector organisations from across Scotland. We are a registered Scottish charity (SC041516).