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Transport Focus response to the North East Combined Authority bus franchising consultation.

Dear consultation team

Please find enclosed Transport Focus's response to the North East Combined Authority's consultation on its proposed bus franchising scheme.

Transport Focus is the independent watchdog for transport users. Our response focuses on whether the proposals will deliver the outcomes that matter most to current and potential bus passengers, and how passengers can continue to shape the design, implementation and monitoring of the scheme.

In summary, our key points are:

- We recognise the potential benefits of franchising, including greater integration, more consistent standards, simplified fares and ticketing, and stronger local accountability. However, franchising is not an end in itself. The test of success will be whether passengers see tangible improvements in reliability, punctuality, affordability, connectivity and information.
- NECA should set out a clear, passenger-led implementation plan, including how it will engage passengers, non-users and representative groups before and during franchising, particularly where there are changes to routes, frequencies, fares, ticketing or information.
- Passenger standards and accountability arrangements should be clear and visible. This should include an enhanced Passenger Charter, effective complaints handling, redress mechanisms and accessible performance information so passengers can see how services are performing.
- Accessibility and inclusion should be built into delivery from the outset, with continued engagement with disabled passengers and user groups, and ongoing monitoring of equality impacts.
- NECA should protect passenger confidence during the transition, with timely, clear and accessible information as services move through franchising tranches, alongside robust contingency planning if operators withdraw services before franchising is fully implemented.

- Long-term financial and demand risks should be managed transparently, including how NECA would respond if operating costs rise, revenue does not increase as expected, or downside demand scenarios materialise.
- Strong collaboration with neighbouring authorities and operators will be important, particularly for cross-boundary services and during procurement, to minimise disruption and protect passengers who travel across authority borders.

We would welcome continued engagement with NECA as the proposals develop and would be happy to discuss how Transport Focus's evidence and passenger insight can support the next stages of implementation.

Yours sincerely

Josh Whitton
Policy Manager

North East MSA bus franchising consultation detailed questionnaire – DEADLINE 27TH SEPTEMBER

Please email your completed response to HaveYourSay@northeast-ca.gov.uk, if you wish to submit your own response not following this template, please email these to the same address. If you are responding on behalf of an organisation, we request that you accompany your responses with a covering letter on headed paper confirming that it is an official response submitted on behalf of your organisation.

** Please note the questions where we have not provided a response have been ~~struck through~~)*

Franchising Scheme

- ~~1. The proposed Bus Franchising Scheme would cover the entire area of the North East MSA, covering Tyne and Wear, Durham and Northumberland County Council areas. Do you have any comments on this? The 'Geographic scope' section on page 32 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document contains further detail on geographical coverage of the proposed scheme.~~
- 2. If the decision to introduce the proposed Bus Franchising Scheme is taken, it is anticipated that the first franchised services will be in place in Autumn 2029. Do you have any comments on this? The 'Transition Strategy' section on page 75 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document sets out the proposed timeline for implementation.**

Transport Focus (TF) welcomes North East Combined Authorities' (NECA) inclusion of passenger impact as one of the three key factors used to determine the proposed phased approach to franchising. This is an important principle, as the transition will need to be managed in a way that protects passengers from unnecessary disruption and maintains confidence in bus services as franchising is introduced.

We would encourage NECA to ensure that good quality, clear and well-timed information is provided throughout the transition period, particularly for passengers travelling across or between the three tranches. This should explain what is changing, when changes will happen, and what passengers can expect before, during and after implementation. Effective communication will be important in maintaining passenger confidence and helping ensure a smooth start to franchising.

- 3. While the majority of services are included in the franchising scheme, some, such as some school services are not. Do you have any comments on this approach? The 'Network' section on page 69 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document sets out this approach in more detail.**

Transport Focus recognises that many passengers make journeys that cross local authority boundaries and are unlikely to distinguish between franchised and non-franchised areas. For these passengers, the priority is a seamless journey, regardless of administrative boundaries.

We therefore welcome the recognition within the Assessment that cross-border services will require ongoing collaboration with neighbouring authorities and operators. Particular attention should be given to ensuring consistency in fares and ticketing, passenger information, service standards, and interchange arrangements, so that passengers do not experience unnecessary complexity or barriers when travelling across boundaries.

Experience from Greater Manchester demonstrates the importance of this. Bee Network franchised services continue to operate across the boundary into neighbouring areas such as Cheshire East, Derbyshire, Lancashire, and West Yorkshire, requiring ongoing coordination between authorities and operators to maintain through journeys and minimise disruption for passengers. Similar collaboration will be important in the North East, particularly where services connect with areas outside the proposed franchising scheme.

Transport Focus would encourage NECA to keep the passenger experience at the centre of these discussions and to monitor any unintended impacts on cross-border travel as franchising is introduced.

Strategic Case

- 1. In the Assessment, we concluded that change is needed to deliver better buses in the North East. Thinking about the buses in the North East, what works well and what doesn't? Please tell us what works well and what could be improved. You may wish to think about routes, connections between places, frequency, fares, access, how easy it is to get information about how to get around, and the overall customer experience.** The 'Case for change' section on page 29 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document sets out the case for change identified in the Assessment.

Transport Focus undertakes and compiles research on bus user satisfaction and perceptions across the country, and we are pleased that the results of our surveys from 2016 to the present have been built into the Assessment. As part of our '[Your Bus Journey](#)' survey, specific research was also undertaken across some parts of NECA, from which a comparison of the Authority's bus performance and user satisfaction can be tracked against the rest of the country. Transport Focus's Your Bus Journey 2025 results cover three areas within NECA; (1) Tyne & Wear, (2) Country Durham and (3) Northumberland. Each of these areas will be focused on in a little more detail below:

Tyne and Wear – ranked 31st out of 43 of the areas in England covered within 2025's survey. The image below shows how the area compares with both similar area types (Tyne and Wear is classified as metropolitan) and England as a whole across different aspects of the bus journey.



Tyne & Wear Your Bus Journey 2025 survey results

Bus passenger satisfaction compared to all England areas

Total satisfied %

		Urban metropolitan	All England areas	Rank
Overall satisfaction	85	84	85	31
Value for money	70	63	63	12
Bus stop where you caught bus	81	80	81	25
Length of time you had to wait for bus	74	71	74	32
Punctuality of bus at stop (arriving on time)	77	74	77	31
Bus driver	88	85	87	25
Length of time journey on bus took	83	82	83	32

Total rating good (very/fairly) %

Information provided at bus stop	79	76	76
Personal security at bus stop	68	65	67
Personal security on bus	79	77	80

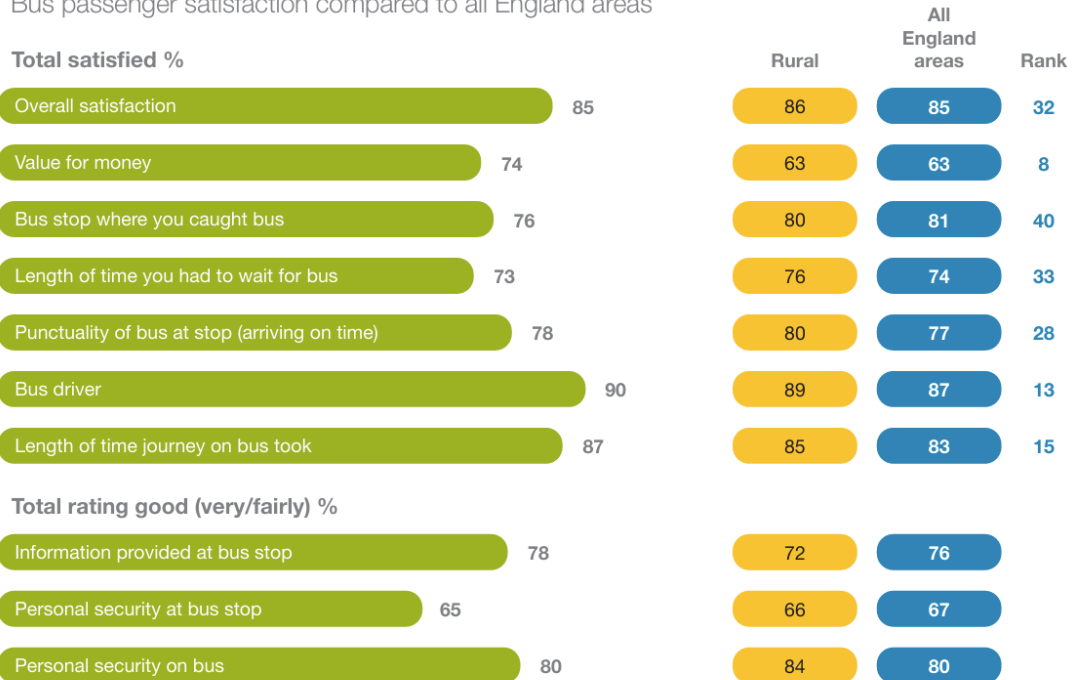
Satisfaction is unchanged on last year and in line with comparator areas. Punctuality, a key driver of satisfaction, is just above the figure for Urban Metropolitan areas.

In common with other Urban Metropolitan areas and England, this year has seen a noticeable decline in both perceptions of value for money of the journey and the proportion of passengers saying that they feel safe at the bus stop.

Country Durham – ranked 32nd out of 43 of the areas in England covered within 2025's survey. The image below shows how the area compares with both similar area types (County Durham is classified as rural) and England as a whole across different aspects of the bus journey.

→ County Durham Your Bus Journey 2025 survey results

Bus passenger satisfaction compared to all England areas



Satisfaction with bus services has improved in Durham over the last two years, especially around:

- Timeliness factors (punctuality, waiting times at stops, journey lengths) which all improved in 2024 from 2023, and have continued to hold up well or increase a little further again in 2025.
- Passenger feedback also indicates that there have also been sustained improvements to the environment and information provided at bus stops.

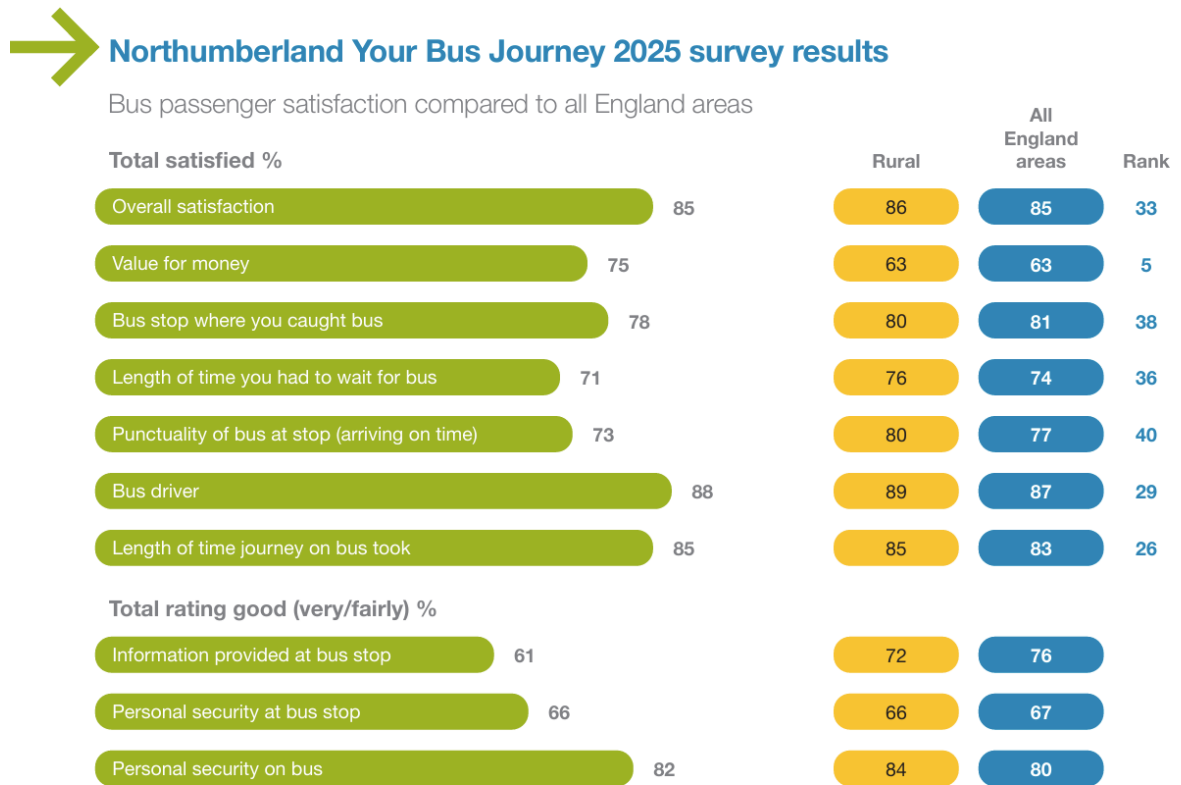
This has contributed to a notable 10 percentage points increase in overall journey satisfaction in two years, from 75% in 2023, to 85% in 2025 – bringing Durham from behind the average for all rural areas, to being broadly in line with it now.

Broader impressions of bus services in the area (i.e. beyond the journey being made at the time of the survey) have also improved, especially in terms of perceived frequency, the places served by buses, and reliability – though there is still some way to go to match more positive perceptions in other areas of the country.

Perceived personal security at bus stops is an area worth attention in all areas in England. It may be worthwhile to explore the experience of disabled passengers in this area in particular, given they are more likely to be concerned about antisocial behaviour.

Northumberland - ranked 33rd out of 43 of the areas in England covered within 2025's survey.

The image below shows how the area compares with both similar area types (Northumberland is classified as rural) and England as a whole across different aspects of the bus journey.



Northumberland performed broadly in line with both the England and rural comparators, with overall satisfaction matching the national average but without strong standout performance across most key metrics. The area's main strength lies in value for money compared to national and rural benchmarks, even though it has declined since last year.

Weaker perceptions of punctuality and waiting times, alongside declining feelings of personal security at bus stops and a modest gap in satisfaction for disabled passengers, represent the main factors constraining overall performance.

The passenger profile was also notably older than average, with a significantly higher proportion aged 65+, which may have influenced both travel patterns and perceptions of the service.

To conclude, the three areas generally perform around, or slightly below, national and comparator averages across most measures. While there are clear strengths, particularly around value for money and recent improvements in County Durham, the results suggest there

remains scope to improve punctuality, reliability, perceptions of safety and overall passenger experience.

In addition to YBJ, Transport Focus' research consistently finds bus users want more buses running more often, buses going to more places and more buses on time at the bus stop. NECA should keep these findings in mind throughout the delivery of franchising to in turn improve user satisfaction.

Finally, Transport Focus would like to praise this consultation. We understand the lengths NECA have gone to consult with stakeholders, including posting a questionnaire to every household in the area. This level of engagement is excellent. Transport Focus would be keen to understand in more depth NECA's plans to continue to engage with interested parties and user groups on the planning, implementation and day to day running of franchised buses across the North East. This is a theme to which we will return in responses to subsequent questions.

2. **The Strategic Case sets out a case for change which focuses on challenges such as a lack of consistency, integration, and accountability to communities, as well as issues regarding value for money and performance. Do you have any comments on the challenges identified in the Strategic Case?** *The 'Case for change' section on page 29 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document sets out the case for change identified in the Assessment.*

We agree with the challenges identified for NECA's bus network moving forward. We would also like to add the challenge of being responsive to passengers, as this is both a challenge and an opportunity for franchising to achieve a step change over current arrangements. Transport Focus have strong relationships with bus providers across the country, each of which face similar challenges across their networks. We would be keen to help support collaboration between local authorities for the betterment of bus services up and down the country.

3. **A number of strategic objectives have been developed to help compare the shortlisted delivery options (continuing with the Enhanced Partnership, and introducing the proposed Bus Franchising Scheme) in the Assessment. Do you have any comments on these strategic objectives for the North East's bus network?** *The Bus reform objectives can be found in the 'Bus reform objectives' section on page 30 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document.*

TF will make comment on each of the 6 objectives reference within the consultation document;

- Buses at the heart of an integrated transport network
 - TF welcomes the plans to provide real-time information – it is important within this transition that non-digital bus users are still able to easily access bus

information, whether this be at the bus stop or through other means. Passengers need to be able to trust real-time information.

- Improve bus punctuality and reliability
 - Our research finds that punctuality and reliability are key to user satisfaction. Transport Focus is pleased to see this area has particular focus within the plans.
- Make the bus network resilient
 - More examples of how to make the bus network resilient would be welcome. Would this include having measures to ensure journey time is more consistent, how the network would function in extreme weather conditions and/ or ensuring users could still access goods and services during things such as industrial action?
- Make the bus network accessible and inclusive to all
 - TF is pleased to see accessibility and inclusivity being made a key strategic objective for franchising. Transport Focus would be keen to hear more detail about how NECA will continue to engage with disabled users when designing and implementing franchising.
- Ensure that everyone feels safe when travelling, especially women and girls
 - TF recognises the importance of safety and perception of safety when using all forms of transport. If users do not feel safe, they will not travel. TF has a violence against women and girls workstream lead who would be keen to collaborate on how to best make progress on this issue.
 - Additionally, anti-social behaviour continues to be a challenge and can have a significant impact on passenger confidence and perceptions of safety.
- Create regional pride in its buses
 - A sense of civic pride on transport services is an important aspiration. This pride is likely to stand upon what passengers care most about: fast and reliable services.

~~4. The potential impact of the proposed Franchising Scheme on neighbouring authorities, and the bus services in these areas, have been identified in the Strategic Case. Do you have any comments on these potential impacts?~~

~~*These potential impacts are discussed in two different sections of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document – ‘Geographic scope’ on page 32 and ‘Network’ on page 69.*~~

5. The Strategic Case concludes that franchising is best placed to deliver our strategic objectives for buses in the region, when compared to continuing with the current EP. Do you have any comments on this conclusion? A summary of the Strategic Case conclusion can be found in the ‘Strategic case conclusion’ section on page 40 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document.

From Transport Focus’s perspective the key challenge is whether NECA’S proposal reflects the needs and priorities of both existing and potential passengers. The closer that the

specifications and targets reflect people's needs, the better the chance that they will deliver the type of services that people want and value and will draw in new users to grow the market.

Transport Focus recognises that franchising has the potential to deliver improvements through greater integration, simplified fares and ticketing, more consistent service standards and increased flexibility in network design. These are all outcomes that passengers regularly tell us they value.

However, many of the potential benefits identified in the Assessment will depend on sustained investment and effective implementation over the long term. The most important test of success will be whether passengers experience tangible improvements in reliability, punctuality, affordability, connectivity and information.

We also welcome the greater influence that franchising could provide to local authorities and elected representatives over the bus network. However, it is important that passengers themselves have meaningful opportunities to influence decisions about service provision, network reviews and future changes. Transport Focus would welcome further detail on how passenger views will be gathered, considered and acted upon under the proposed arrangements.

Economic Case

- 1. The Economic Case of the Assessment considers the impact of the proposed scheme on the economy, environment, operators, passengers, the MSA, and wider society compared to the current EP. Do you have any comments on these impacts?** *The 'Impacts' section on page 44 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document discusses the economic impact of the proposed scheme.*

The Assessment concludes that franchising is not expected to increase the availability of transport services when compared with the EP, nor to significantly alter existing public transport infrastructure or routes.

However, changes to fares and ticketing are expected to make bus travel more affordable compared with an EP, and to improve access to education, healthcare, retail, and leisure opportunities across the region.

Passengers are expected to benefit from improved passenger information, branding, marketing and improved punctuality and reliability. Journey quality is expected to improve as is bus users' sense of security.

- 2. The Economic Case concludes that the proposed Bus Franchising Scheme offers better overall value for money than the current Enhanced Partnership. Do you have any comments on this conclusion?** *A summary of the conclusion of the economic case can be found on page 48 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document.*

Transport Focus notes the conclusion that the Franchising model offers the Combined Authority advantages over the current model with a relative Benefit Cost Ratio (BCR) of 1.86 of franchising over the EP model.

In addition, findings in the consultation document show that the Franchising scheme would both achieve better relative Net Present Value (NPV) than the EP model. Along with this, Transport Focus acknowledges that there are wider socio-economic benefits to the Franchising Model. We agree that this wider assessment represents value for money for public investment, though acknowledge the tough choices Local Authorities make when assessing where best to make public investment.

However, it is disappointing to see that the economic case within the consultation document predicts a continuation in the decline of bus patronage across NECA, this decline being predicted in both the Franchising Scheme and Future Partnership models, albeit a marginally smaller drop in patronage. While the Economic Case adopts a prudent approach to forecasting, the projected long-term decline in patronage under both the Enhanced Partnership and franchising scenarios is concerning. Although franchising is forecast to perform better than the Enhanced Partnership model, demand is still expected to decline substantially over the appraisal period. This serves as a reminder that franchising alone will not address all of the structural challenges facing bus services. Delivering sustained improvements in reliability, frequency, affordability and ease of use will be essential if the ambition of attracting and retaining more passengers is to be realised and reversing this decline.

Financial Case

- ~~1. The Financial Case has identified the estimated costs of introducing and operating the proposed Bus Franchising Scheme. Do you have any comments on these costs?~~

~~The 'Financial assessment of, and investment needed for, franchising' section on page 56 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document details these estimated costs.~~

- 2. A number of funding sources have been identified which could support bus services under franchising, including revenue from fares, the Integrated Settlement, and the transport levy, among others. Do you have any comments on the proposed sources of funding? 'Funding and financing options' on page 51 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document details these funding sources.**

We note the commitment to maintain the current extent of the network for 10 years and to cap fare increases.

We further note that the Mayor has confirmed that she will not charge a mayoral precept during her first term and at this time there is no ambition to do so in a potential second term. This removes one potential risk. The NECA franchising scheme was made on an assumption of

regular increases in the Mayoral precept. There is a risk that in future this precept is not rewarded or increased, mitigations for this situation should be put in place

The auditor's report notes that the Integrated Settlement has been assumed to continue across the first 10 years of the franchising period, with a similar mechanism assumed to be available for the remaining 20 years. However, the current Integrated Settlement is due to end during the initial franchise term, having been set for an initial period covering 2026 to 2030, which will result in a need for alternative funding to be identified beyond this period. The Authority may then need to increase funding, make cuts or increase fares.

- ~~3.—The Financial Case details a number of risks which could have a significant impact on the successful implementation of the franchising scheme. Do you have any comments on the assessment of risk to the Mayoral Strategic Authority in relation to the proposed franchising scheme?~~

~~*Risks are discussed in the 'Risk' section on page 58 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document.*~~

- 4. The Financial Case concludes that the proposed Bus Franchising Scheme is affordable, with the funding options identified providing a robust framework for addressing the investment need while allowing for flexibility in response to evolving financial conditions. Do you have any comments on this conclusion?** *A summary of the conclusion of the Financial Case can be found in the 'Franchising and call for investment conclusion' on page 61 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document.*

Transport Focus notes that the conclusion in the consultation is that the proposed franchise scheme would be affordable. We also note, and agree, that the franchising scheme has the capacity to increase revenue and cost risks for NECA. A further concern relates to the affordability of the scheme, as operating costs are forecast to rise as NECA takes responsibility for a greater proportion of the network. If revenue does not increase in line with these costs, then the affordability may become an increasing issue over the longer term. These will need to be carefully managed. In particular the downside funding and demand scenarios described in the Financial Case introduce a higher level of risks to the affordability of bus services with serious potential consequences for passenger should these conditions arise.

Commercial Case

- ~~1.—A number of commercial objectives have been developed by the MSA. Do you have any comments on these commercial objectives? *The commercial objectives can be found in the 'Commercial objectives' section on page 63 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document.*~~

2.—The Commercial Case describes the MSA’s proposed packaging and transition strategies, with three tranches made up of a mix of ‘large’ and ‘small’ contract packages. Do you have any comments on this approach? *The ‘Packaging strategy’ and ‘Transition strategy’ sections on pages 74 and 75 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document provides more detail on these strategies.*

3. The Commercial Case identifies a minimum mobilisation period of six months between a local service contract being awarded and services beginning to operate under this contract. Do you have any comments on the proposed minimum mobilisation period? *The ‘Procurement’ subsection of the ‘Transition Strategy’ section on page 76 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document notes the minimum mobilisation period.*

Transport Focus recognises the need to balance efficient implementation with operational readiness. A minimum mobilisation period should provide operators with sufficient time to prepare vehicles, staffing, customer information and operational systems, while minimising delays to the delivery of passenger benefits. The key test will be whether the mobilisation arrangements support a smooth introduction of services with good clear communication with passengers along with minimising disruption .

4.—The MSA proposes that contracts will have a maximum length of seven-to-eight years, with a shorter guaranteed term (approximately five-to-six years). Do you have any comments on the proposed length of franchise contracts? *Discussion around the contract length can be found in the ‘Contract length’ subsection of the ‘Contract Structure’ section on page 72 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document.*

5.—Operators are assumed to provide the vehicles under franchising which will be required to comply with an industry-standard specification set by the MSA. To facilitate this approach the MSA will operate a Residual Value Mechanism, lowering the barrier to entry for non-incumbent operators and reducing the risk of operators being left with stranded assets at the end of a franchise contract. Do you have any comments on this approach? *Detail around the proposed approach to vehicle provision and specification can be found in the ‘Vehicle provision and specification’ subsection of the ‘Asset strategy’ section on page 66 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document.*

6.—The Commercial Case assumes that 12 existing ‘strategic’ depot sites are acquired by the MSA for use by operators of ‘large’ contracts, with ‘small’ contract operators expected to provide their own depot sites. Do you have any comments on the approach to depots under the Proposed Franchising Scheme? *Detail around the proposed approach to depot provision can be found in the ‘Depot provision’ subsection of the ‘Asset strategy’ section on page 66 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document.*

7.—The Commercial Case highlights various opportunities to facilitate the involvement of small and medium-sized operators (SMOs) in the North East bus market under franchising. Do you have any comments on how the scheme would support or affect

~~small and medium-sized operators? These opportunities can be found in the ‘Opportunities for small-and-medium-sized operator involvement’ section on page 78 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document.~~

8. **Under the proposed Bus Franchising Scheme, revenue risk would be retained by the MSA, with cost risk transferred to operators. Do you have any comments on the proposed allocation of risk between the MSA and operators?** *Discussion on risk allocation can be found in the ‘Revenue risk’ and ‘Cost risk and inflation indexation’ subsections of the ‘Contract structure’ section on page 73 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document.*

Transport Focus agree that the franchising model could offer a more stable operating environment for operators while giving NECA autonomy over network design and enabling more effective cross-subsidy of routes. Conversely, it would increase risk for the Combined Authority as it will become responsible for fluctuations in demand and cost inflation.

9. **The Commercial Case concludes that – while both the proposed franchising scheme and the existing EP are commercially viable options – franchising performs better against the commercial objectives. Do you have any comments on this conclusion?** *A summary of the conclusion of the commercial case can be found on page 82 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document.*

Transport Focus notes the conclusion that both franchising and the Enhanced Partnership are considered commercially viable options. We recognise the advantages identified for franchising, particularly the greater ability to deliver consistent standards across the network, simplify fares and ticketing arrangements, improve passenger information and exercise greater influence over network design. Franchising may also support increased competition through periodic tendering and create opportunities for participation by smaller operators.

However, while the proposed commercial model would increase Mayoral Authority influence over the bus network, it is important that passengers themselves also have meaningful opportunities to influence decisions about service provision, network reviews and future changes. Transport Focus would welcome further detail on how passenger views will be gathered, considered and acted upon as part of the governance and decision-making arrangements.

Management Case

1. **The Management Case sets out how the proposed Bus Franchising Scheme would be managed and what competency and resource is required. Do you have any comments on the delivery arrangements set out to deliver and manage franchising, such as if**

adequate capability and capacity is identified? *Detail on these arrangements can be found in the 'Management and responsibility split of the EP and franchising scheme' and 'Competency and resource' sections on page 83 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document.*

Transport Focus agrees with the consultation document that franchising would be a significant expansion of NECA's accountabilities which would require additional skills and capabilities. The consultation document refers to a skills audit showing an additional 47 FTE employees would be required to implement and manage franchising. Transport Focus would like to seek confirmation that as part of these 47 FTEs, customer service and complaints are taken into account. Building a relationship and trust requires a focus on these qualitative functions and is key to improving customer confidence in their local bus network.

We note that the proposed Delivery Body would become the primary point of contact for passengers, including providing information, handling complaints and managing customer enquiries. These functions are central to building passenger trust and confidence. We would welcome further details regarding proposed complaints handling arrangements, customer service standards and plans for reviewing and strengthening the North East Bus Passenger Charter. Transport Focus has undertaken research on complaints handling and published guidance on passenger charters, supported by the DfT, and would welcome the opportunity to share relevant findings and advice.

- ~~2.—The Management Case describes the arrangements proposed for the potential transfer of bus industry employees to new operators. Do you have any comments on these arrangements?~~

~~*Detail on these arrangements can be found in the 'Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) (TUPE) regulation' section on page 84 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document.*~~

- 3. In the Management Case the MSA has identified a number of activities which would have to take place during the transition to franchised services. Do you have any comments on the activities identified, and the proposed timeline?** *These activities can be found in the 'Transitional change and mobilisation for both options' section on page 85 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document.*

The management case states that the Mayoral Strategic Authority/Delivery Body will develop plans to provide operational continuity and sustain customer confidence during the transition to franchising, including managing the risk that an operator withdraws services before franchising is fully implemented.

Local service contracts would include a performance regime offering operators financial incentives or deductions for performance against operational and service quality benchmarks, including the punctuality and reliability of services.

We agree with this principle. However, Transport Focus would like to understand how it is proposed that punctuality would be measured and have an opportunity to comment. Punctuality often declines between the first stop and intermediate timing points. Performance can vary dramatically between routes and at different times of day. Averages can be unhelpful.

Once the scheme is up and running, franchising authorities must consult on how well the franchising scheme is working regularly throughout the life of the scheme, with formal engagement taking place at least every 36 months. Consultation with Transport Focus will provide an independent assessment of how well the scheme is working, supplemented by the Delivery Body's wider evidence base, including performance benchmarking and user feedback.

We welcome the proposal to place passenger experience at the centre of your plans. Transport Focus is keen to provide help and support to NECA throughout this upcoming process of transition. *Your Bus Journey findings* can in participate be used as a way to support NECA and understand where and how passenger benefit could be implemented.

~~4.—The Management Case has set out a five-step process to manage performance and ensure that the anticipated benefits of the proposed Bus Franchising Scheme are realised. Do you have any comments on how the MSA would monitor and evaluate the performance of the proposed Bus Franchising Scheme? This process can be found in the 'Performance and benefits management' section on page 85 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document.~~

~~5.—A governance structure has been proposed which details where responsibility for different aspects of the franchised bus network would rest, and the ways in which local authorities would be able to influence the franchised network. Do you have any comments on the proposed governance arrangements?~~

~~*Detail on the proposed governance arrangements can be found in the 'Programme management and governance' section on page 90 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document.*~~

~~6.—The management case concludes that both the existing EP and the proposed franchising scheme are deliverable, with franchising requiring additional investment, transition activity and governance arrangements to enable successful operation. Do you have any comments on this conclusion?~~

~~*A summary of the conclusion of the management case can be found on page 93 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document.*~~

Equality, Accessibility & Inclusion

~~1.—Do you have any comments on the findings of the full Equality Impact Assessment?~~

A summary of the full Equality Impact Assessment can be found on page 94 of the Bus Franchising Consultation Document.

Final Questions

1. Do you support the introduction of the proposed Bus Franchising Scheme in the North East?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Please explain why.

Transport Focus recognises that franchising has the potential to deliver a more integrated and consistent passenger experience through simplified fares and ticketing, common service standards and greater control over network design. These are all outcomes that passengers regularly tell us they value. However, many of the potential benefits identified in the Assessment will depend on sustained investment and effective implementation over the long term.

Franchising should not be viewed as an end in itself. The success of any future model will depend on whether it delivers the outcomes passengers care most about: reliable services, buses that run when expected, networks that connect people to the places they need to go, affordable fares and clear information. The most important test of success will be whether passengers see tangible improvements in their day-to-day journeys.

We therefore support continued focus on ensuring that passenger priorities are reflected in service specifications, performance targets and future investment decisions.

However, to get the most value out of the proposal it will need to be accompanied by an engagement strategy setting out how NECA will engage with passengers and how they will use the information gathered through this. This engagement would include:

- Engagement and consultation with passengers and non-users – especially on significant changes to routes and frequencies, or fares, ticketing and information
- Measuring passenger satisfaction and making corresponding improvements to services. The best judge of how well services are being provided is the people using those services. Implementing standards and targets for passenger satisfaction will help create an environment of continuous improvement.
- Setting out passengers' expectations to standards of service in an enhanced Passengers Charter, with effective mechanisms for redress and a good, and well-publicised complaints handling system.

- Making performance information available to passengers. Publishing this information is regarded as a right in principle and is good for trust because 'it helps keeps the industry honest'. This is the case even if individuals have little personal appetite in seeking it out – the fact that others are looking at it can help drive positive behaviours.

Transport Focus would welcome a clear commitment from NECA on each of these above bullet points.

Building in such engagement from the beginning would help to improve the relationship between passengers and operators. Trust has both a rational and an emotional element. At the rational level it means running the buses on time, being reliable, coping with disruption, resolving problems, and offering value for money. Service delivery (in other words delivering the essentials) is at the heart of this rational element. The better the operator runs the service, the higher the levels of trust generated. Being unreliable or inconsistent has a large detrimental impact on levels of trust.

However, it is the more emotionally engaging factors that build real affinity. This includes things like staff going the extra mile, and feeling like the company really does care what happens to you – as evidenced by interacting with passengers and involving them in the decision-making process. It also means operators communicating well, especially during disruption. The 'radio silence' approach leaves passengers unable to assess the alternatives, update work/family on amended arrival times and not feeling in control of the situation.

2. Are there any changes you think would improve the proposed Franchising Scheme?

The Consultation Document does set out the results of an EQIA. Transport Focus would like to see what plans NECA have in place to continue to monitor impact assessments moving forward throughout the funding period, regardless of the operating model that is chosen by the local authority.

3. Do you have any further comments?

In recent years, the role of the driver has become even more prominent. The challenge to retain and recruit in drivers in some areas has been a significant challenge for the industry. In turn, shortages of drivers have been a significant challenge for the industry and impacted on the reliability of services for passenger. Our *Making Great Bus Journeys (2024)* research found that the bus driver is the second most important factor in delivering a great bus journey, behind only timeliness and punctuality. This highlights the importance of recruitment, retention and training in shaping the overall passenger experience and should be a key consideration within any franchising arrangements.

Transport Focus would like to see clarification of any strategy for driver training and standards. Will this be left to operators running the franchise services or would NECA be involved in things like training specifications? Effective recruitment and retention of drivers will be essential to support effective service delivery. The bus driver must also consider the comfort and safety of

diverse groups of passengers, who may have a variety of needs. And while many passengers may have limited interaction with drivers, they do observe how drivers handle requests for such help from fellow passengers.

The role of the driver is often under the microscope and noted by passengers. Our research shows differences in satisfaction levels for passengers with a disability that for some is markedly lower. To improve this, there must be a focus on support and training for drivers, particularly for passengers with a seen or unseen disability.