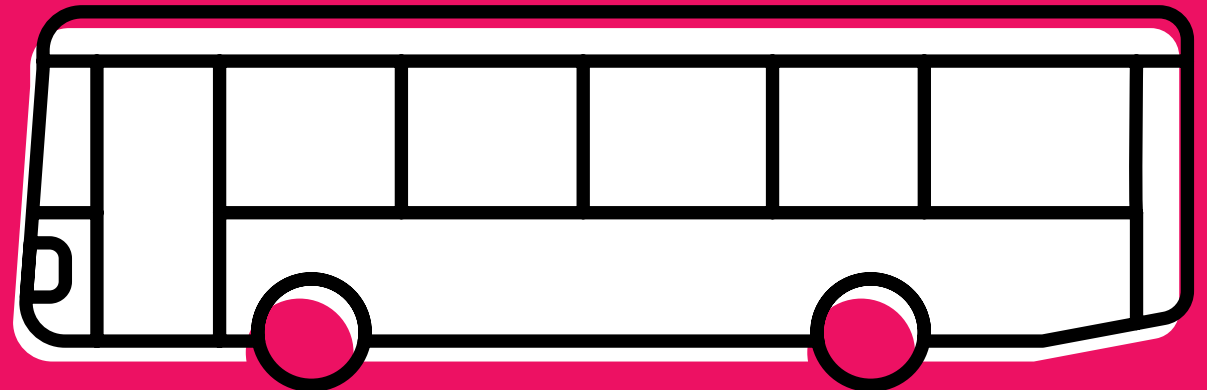
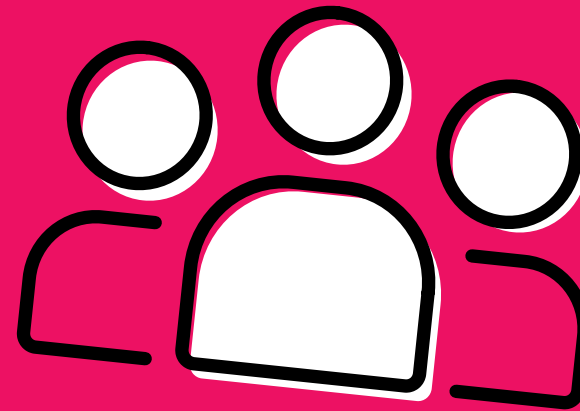


North East Bus  
Franchising Consultation

# Have your say on the future of our buses

July 2026



# Buses in the North East – What does it look like now?

In 2024/25, people made over 115 million bus journeys, making buses the most used form of public transport in the North East.

Buses are vital to our region, with more journeys taken per person than in most other regions in the country. Every day, people rely on the bus to connect them to jobs, education, healthcare, leisure and tourism.

However, the North East bus network has seen a significant long-term decline. Over the past 15 years, passenger journeys have fallen by 31% and mileage operated by bus companies has dropped by 32%. In practice, this means fewer buses, less frequent services, and routes disappearing altogether.

## Key features of the current North East bus market:



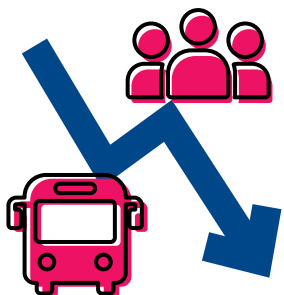
Buses are currently **deregulated**, meaning private bus companies generally set routes, timetables, fares and service standards.



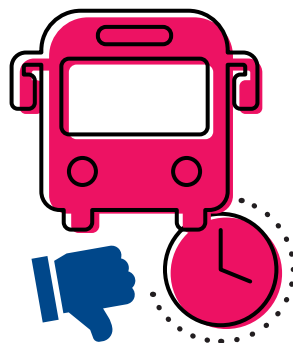
An **'Enhanced Partnership'** is in place, where the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority (North East MSA), local authorities and bus companies work together to deliver improvements to bus services. However, bus companies still retain control over key decisions such as timetables and fares .



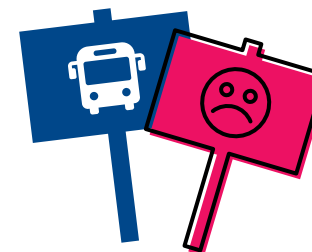
# What are the challenges?



Passenger numbers and the miles operated by bus have fallen by 31% and 32% respectively since deregulation in 2010.

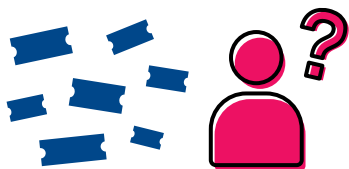


Too many buses are unreliable, with only 87% running on time, well short of the 95% target – making them a less attractive option and worsening opinions of the network.



As decisions are generally made on a commercial basis, communities have little influence over bus services and little ability to hold bus companies to account.

As each bus company works independently, **standards are inconsistent throughout the bus network** and integration between other bus routes and transport types is limited. This means that:



Bus tickets are complex with around 370 categories of tickets.



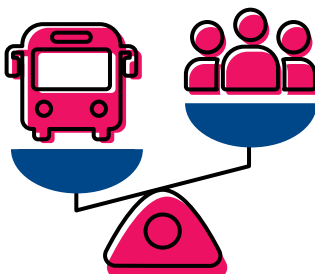
In many places, one company runs most services with little or no competition, meaning there's less incentive to improve things for passengers.



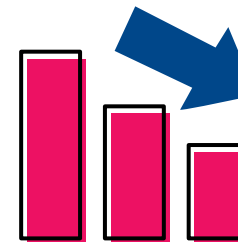
Safety and security on buses remains a big concern for passengers with only 80% of bus users surveyed reporting a positive impression of personal security on the bus and 67% at bus stops.



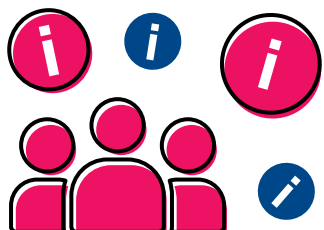
Prices have historically risen more than inflation.



Despite local and national public funding making up around 51% of bus company income, there is limited public control over the network.



47% of North East bus users rely on the bus as their only option. If the bus network continues to decline, residents will lose access to jobs and education, with wider impacts on the economy.



Passenger information is inconsistent and not integrated between bus routes or with other transport modes such as rail, Metro and the Ferry.

# Our vision for the future

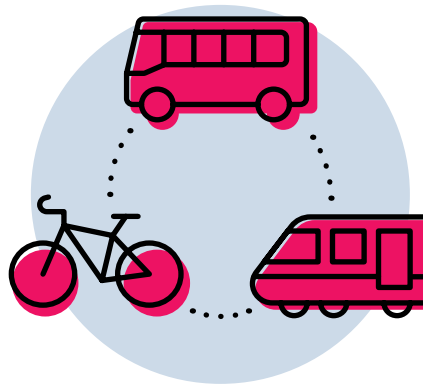
The Mayor's Local Transport Plan sets a vision for a "green, integrated transport network that works for all," to achieve this, the above challenges must be addressed.

In London, Manchester, and many cities across Europe, the transport authority sets fares, routes, timetables and service standards through a system called bus franchising. Bus companies bid for contracts to run services and are held accountable for keeping buses running on time.

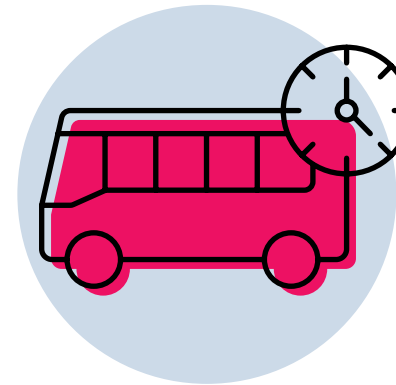
To understand if bus franchising would be a better option for the North East, the North East MSA has prepared an Assessment which compares the proposed Bus Franchising Scheme with continuing with our Enhanced Partnership.

The Assessment considers how the proposed Bus Franchising Scheme would deliver improvements to bus services, sets out how franchising in the North East would be set up, delivered, managed and funded by the North East MSA, and compares this to what we currently do via the Enhanced Partnership. Six key objectives were developed by the North East MSA to assess the options available:

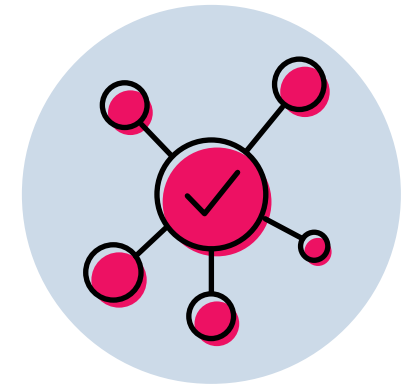
# 6 key objectives



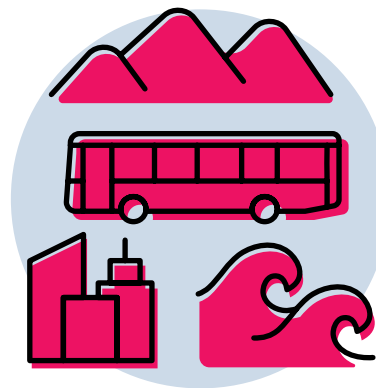
**Buses at the heart of an integrated transport network: 'The Angel Network'.**



**Improve bus punctuality and reliability.**



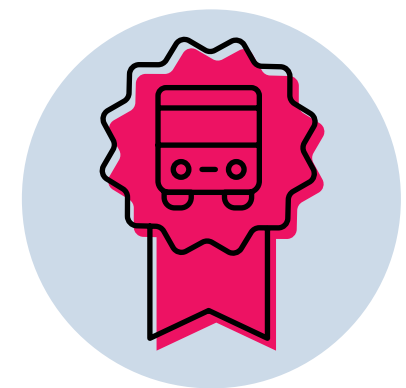
**Make the bus network resilient.**



**Make the bus network accessible and inclusive to all.**



**Ensure that everyone feels safe when travelling, especially women and girls.**



**Create regional pride in its buses.**

# Our vision for the future

While introducing bus franchising would allow significantly more public control, and provide opportunities to address some key challenges, it would be a huge undertaking and would transfer extensive responsibilities to the North East MSA. This will include taking financial responsibility for the bus service, as well as keeping around 317,500 bus passengers a day informed and satisfied with their journeys across more than 500 individual bus routes.

Through taking financial responsibility for the bus network, the MSA would be required to meet operators' costs, around £230 million a year in today's prices, alongside responsibility for making sure that fare income continues to grow and subsidy is provided to improve services.

## The Assessment concludes that franchising is:

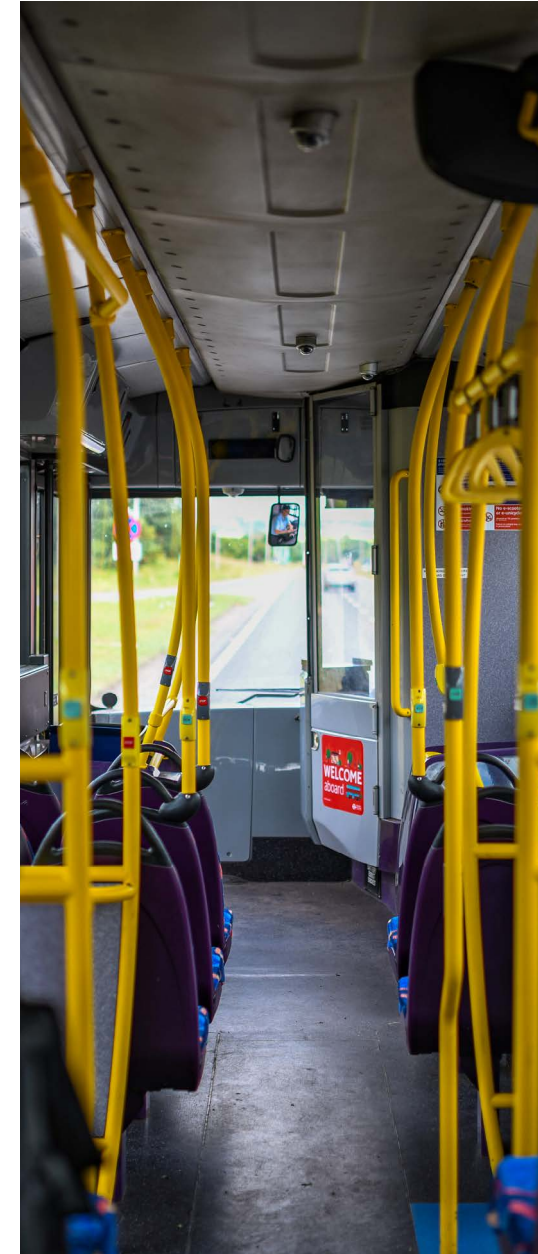
The best way to achieve our key objectives and improve bus services in the North East

Good value for money

Affordable

Commercially viable

Deliverable









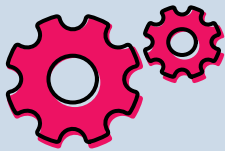

# Our vision for the future

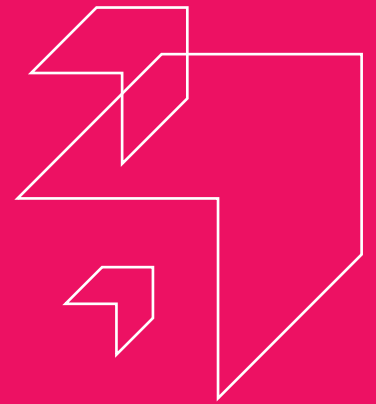


We are consulting with the public to gather views on the proposed Bus Franchising Scheme. To help explain how our proposals would change the delivery of bus services,

we have created a table which shows the key differences between the Enhanced Partnership currently in place, and the proposed Bus Franchising Scheme if it was introduced.

	Current Enhanced Partnership	Proposed Bus Franchising Scheme	What does it mean for you?
<b>Fares and ticketing</b> 	<p>Bus companies set most fares and tickets, with passengers having to navigate around 370 different ticket types. Public fare schemes (like capped fares) involve agreements to pay bus companies back for lost revenue.</p>	<p>The North East MSA would be able to set fares and decide what tickets are best for people with fares not rising above inflation for ten years from day one of franchising.</p>	<p>Simpler tickets and better value for money.</p>
<b>Routes and timetables</b> 	<p>Bus companies decide most routes and timetables. The public sector pays for some extra services where routes are needed but doesn't make money from them.</p>	<p>The North East MSA would decide routes and timetables for the franchised network, and bus companies would run them under a contract. This would allow for greater opportunities for integration between bus, Metro, rail, Ferry, walking, wheeling and cycling.</p> <p>The North East MSA would invest into the bus network, committing to maintaining the size of the network for ten years from day one of franchising, guaranteeing network stability.</p>	<p>Routes and timetables would be planned more consistently, helping buses connect better across the network and reducing cuts to the network.</p>
<b>Safety while travelling</b> 	<p>Bus companies are responsible for passenger safety with varying approaches throughout the network.</p>	<p>The North East MSA will take strategic control of passenger safety across the network.</p>	<p>Consistent and increased safety measures.</p>
<b>Journey information (website/app)</b> 	<p>Passenger information varies across bus companies.</p>	<p>One website and app bringing together all passenger information. This will make it easier to find and connect information across different types of transport.</p>	<p>One place to find information.</p>

	Current Enhanced Partnership	Proposed Bus Franchising Scheme	What does it mean for you?
<b>Branding / visual identity</b> 	Buses look different depending on the company running them.	A single network identity (“Angel Network”) including buses, and at stops and stations.	One recognisable identity to help passengers travel with confidence.
<b>How communities can have a say</b> 	There is a current Code of Conduct which requires consultation with communities prior to network changes, but bus companies have the final say. Engagement can be limited in practice.	Greater ability for communities and local elected representatives to influence network planning, change decisions and hold operators to account.	Greater ability for local people to influence the bus network and have their say.
<b>How bus services are organised</b> 	<p>Bus companies mostly run services commercially (for profit) and decide how they operate, with some improvements agreed through the Enhanced Partnership.</p> <p>This means overall standards can be inconsistent and the bus network is not integrated with the wider transport network (such as Metro and rail).</p>	Most services would be run under contracts set by the North East MSA, and bus companies would compete to operate services under those contracts to standards set by the MSA.	<p>More public control over how buses are planned and delivered, focusing on people, not profit.</p> <p>Profitable routes will also be balanced against unprofitable routes so that everyone throughout the region benefits.</p>
<b>Financial responsibility</b> 	<p>Financial responsibility for commercial services generally rests with bus companies, meaning they can cut a route if it becomes too expensive to run, or increase fares when they want to.</p> <p>However, the public sector currently invests heavily in the bus network, providing 51% of operator income, for example by capping fares and to help provide services that would otherwise have been cut.</p>	<p>The North East MSA will take on financial responsibility for the bus network, meaning that any loss of bus network income will have to be accounted for.</p> <p>This is a significant responsibility for the North East MSA to take on and must be carefully managed, but would result in better value for public investment by having operators compete with each other for the opportunity to run services.</p>	While this comes with risks, taking this responsibility gives the North East MSA the ability to strengthen and improve the bus network as well as making better use of public money.



# Have your **say**

**complete the public consultation survey:**  
[www.northeast-ca.gov.uk/haveyoursay](http://www.northeast-ca.gov.uk/haveyoursay)

**read the full consultation document:**  
[www.northeast-ca.gov.uk/haveyoursay](http://www.northeast-ca.gov.uk/haveyoursay)

## Contact us

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0191 277 4223

[northeast-ca.gov.uk/haveyoursay](http://northeast-ca.gov.uk/haveyoursay)

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