

Block 4 report – Bus franchising

September 2024

# West Midlands Greener Together Citizens' Panel



# Introduction

The Greener Together Citizens' Panel exists to help the **West Midlands Combined Authority** to shape its work to achieve a fairer, greener and healthier region.

The outcomes from the Panel's discussion are presented to officers to consider and implement, where possible, the recommendations and ideas of the Panel.

Please see past Panel reports on our [website here](#).

## What is a citizens' panel?

A citizens' panel is an established democratic process that is used all over the world. It brings together a randomly selected group of people who broadly reflect the key demographic characteristics of a population. The people who attend learn about issues with input from experts, reflect on those issues together and reach conclusions about how to deal with them.

Once established, a panel can exist over several months or longer, meeting at regular intervals (e.g. once per month with rest periods between topics).





# PANEL MEMBERS



Please note that not all panel members are pictured





---

## About the panel

The West Midlands Greener Together Citizens' Panel brings together 30 residents from across the West Midlands to deliberate some of the key challenges that we face in creating a fairer, greener and healthier region.

The panel was recruited in Spring 2023 using a sortition approach, where invitations are sent to households across a defined area (in this case the West Midlands region) and from those who respond, a sample is recruited which broadly reflects the profile of residents. As some panel members have left the group during that time, others have been brought in to replace them and to maintain the panel's reflectiveness.

Panel members are given a thank you payment for each session they participate in. Extra help in getting to and from sessions is provided for those who need it.

---

## How it works

The panel is convened around a specific theme with specialists invited to present to the panel and answer their questions. During a series of group discussions and activities, panel members then explore ideas, opportunities, tensions and trade-offs relevant to that theme. This can include coming up with a set of preference or priorities, or feedback about different types of policy response which the WMCA, councils and other partners might take.

## This report

The panel has previously completed three blocks of work: air quality; retrofitting buildings; and climate adaptation. This fourth block of work comprising a day of workshop time across two sessions looked at bus franchising.

This comprised half a day online and a full day face-to-face, half of which was spent on the bus franchising topic. The other half of that face to face session - dedicated to reflections on the panel process and ideas for the future - will be reported separately.



# The Greener Together Citizen's Panel block 4 in numbers

**30 panel members**

reflective of the combined authority's population

**7 hours**

of learning, discussion and presenting their feedback



---

# Main messages



---

# Session 1A – Understanding bus franchising

## Purpose

This was a half day online session focused on communicating information to the panel. The session introduced panel members to some key facts and figures about bus use in the West Midlands; to the bus franchising model and how it works; and to the planned consultation on bus franchising that TfWM will be launching in 2025.

TfWM wanted to understand which elements of bus franchising panel members would be most motivated to comment on in a consultation exercise, and the information they would most want to see as part of that consultation. This would help inform how the consultation is packaged and communicated to the public.



## Task

Panel members considered what aspects of bus franchising they would be most compelled to comment on through a public consultation process.

## Members considered seven 'ingredients' of a potential bus franchising consultation and for each were asked:

*'Is this something you would be interested to see information about as part of a consultation process, and something you would want to give opinions on?'*

1. **The strategic case for bus franchising:** the 'big picture' benefits that franchising could deliver in the West Midlands. It's about zooming out and considering how the bus system works now and how that might change under a franchising model.
2. **The economic, commercial and financial case for bus franchising:** whether franchising would cost the public purse more than it does under the current system. Would it likely make or lose money for the tax payer? Can TfWM afford to make the changes? What are the financial risks?
3. **How the bus service is managed:** how management of the bus service would be done differently under a franchising model and whether TfWM is well-placed to manage a franchised bus service.
4. **The bus network:** how we can protect people's access to buses in their area under a franchised model and the changes it could mean for how bus routes are designed in future. Through the consultation we won't be asking people what they think about specific routes, but we could talk about *how* routes are decided now and how that could change in future with a franchising model.
5. **The fares system:** understanding the impact franchising could have on bus fares. For instance, how could it enable us to keep tickets affordable? And what could be implications of different approaches for passengers?
6. **Customer experience:** understanding how franchising could impact on 'customer experience' in getting information and using the bus network.
7. **Value for money:** considering whether will franchising will represent good value, bearing in mind the sorts of changes to bus services that may come as a result.



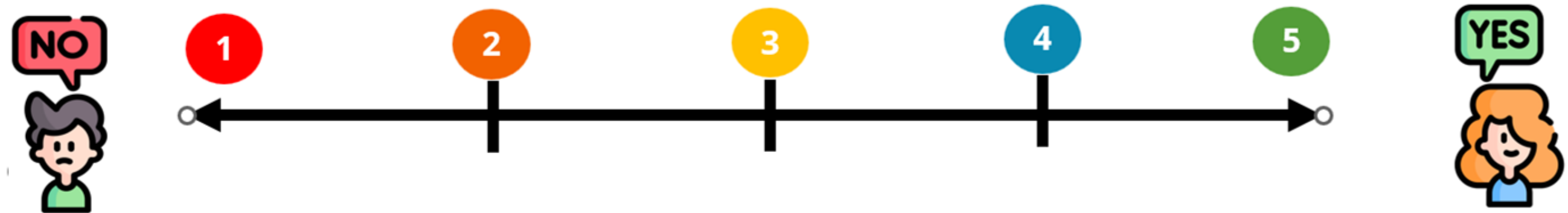


# Task

Panel members considered what aspects of bus franchising they would be more compelled to comment on through a public consultation process.

## What panel members said (1)

Panel members gave a score to each ingredient from 1 to 5 - 1 being not at all important and 5 being very important.



Most important to consult on...

How fares are set (average 4.5)

Customer experience (average 4.4)

How routes are determined (average 4.3)

Value for money (average 3.9)

The economic, financial and commercial cases (average 3.7)

How the bus system is managed (average 3.2)

Least important to consult on...

The strategic case (average 2.9)



**Task**  
Panel members considered what aspects of bus franchising they would be most compelled to comment on through a public consultation process.

## What panel members said (2)

The reasons why panel members scored the seven ingredients of the bus franchising consultation as they did:

### How fares are set

- The impact on fares felt like the aspect of franchising that would be of most interest to people, and currently fares seemed very variable across the region.

### Customer experience

- Panel members thought there needed to be a lot of information provided *on the ways in which* bus franchising could impact customer experience. Cleanliness, bus etiquette, maintenance, timeliness, ease of understanding and using services were all discussed as important factors determining passengers' experience of the service.
- Panel members wondered if franchising would result in a centrally-run customer services function.

### How routes are determined

- Panel members thought it would be valuable for passengers to input on routes in their areas.
- They also said it would be useful to understand how profitable / commercially viable different routes are.

### Value for money

- Panel members wanted more context to understand this part of the consultation. Above all they wanted to understand if the franchising model would cost more or less to the taxpayer and to bus users.
- They wanted to understand what model would most likely give them the best service for what they have to pay - including the set up cost and ongoing charges.



**Task**  
Panel members considered what aspects of bus franchising they would be most compelled to comment on through a public consultation process.

## What panel members said (3)

The reasons why panel members scored the seven ingredients of the bus franchising consultation as they did:

### The economic, financial and commercial cases

- Panel members said that people will want to know how any changes would impact the cost to them, e.g. in council tax.
- However, they thought the language around the economic, financial and commercial case could be confusing and thought this section of the consultation would need to be accompanied by a lot of supporting information if the public are going to be able to give an opinion on this.

### How the bus system is managed

- Panel members wanted to understand the difference between a franchised (centralised) management and the current management and the relative benefits of each. They were especially interested in what franchising would mean for how complaints are addressed and where accountability lies.
- Some said it would not be useful for them as citizens to comment on the 'nitty gritty' of how things are managed but just to understand what how the model worked.
- Some said that public input on this area might be minimal whilst others felt that the current management was so bad that the public should be invited to input on this too.

### The strategic case

- Panel members said this was something to be informed about more than invited to comment on as it is a more complex area and trying to explain it as part of the consultation process could overwhelm respondents.
- Some said the consultation would need to make clear what the 'big picture' differences would be between the current way that buses operate and a franchised model, including how customers could benefit – and to do this using accessible language.
- Some said this should include commentary on how changes to the bus service could be part of wider efforts to encourage public transport use and the potential benefits of this.





---

# Session 1B – Communicating about bus franchising

## Purpose

This session explained how the decision on bus franchising would be made in the West Midlands and, following on from Session 1A, asked the panel how they would go about explaining franchising to other citizens.

We wanted to understand how clear panel members were about the franchising model and what it could entail. what they thought the most important aspects to communicate to the public would be; and how.



## Task

Panel members were asked how they would introduce the topic of bus franchising to members of the public, using the information they were given at workshop 1 and their own ideas about which elements of bus franchising were most important for people to understand and what sort of language would work best.

### What panel members said

#### Feedback on how to consult on bus franchising – headline messages from group presentations

1. Panel members said the consultation needs to explain the difference between the status quo and a franchised model as a starting point.
2. Panel members thought the consultation should focus on explaining what impacts franchising could have for different types of people, using pen portraits to illustrate those potential impacts. This could include, for instance, a bus user in the city, a bus user in a rural area, and someone who doesn't use buses at all but as a taxpayer has an interest in how public money is used.
3. Overall panel members thought the consultation should focus on the basics, recognising that this will be a complex topic for many and if presented with too much information, some will disengage. That said, some would want to understand and comment on more detailed information, so the consultation should be presented in layers whereby the most interested and knowledgeable could click through to more advanced material.



## Task

Panel members were asked how they would introduce the topic of bus franchising to members of the public, using the information they were given at workshop 1 and their own ideas about which elements of bus franchising were most important for people to understand and what sort of language would work best.

### Observations from the exercise (1)

Group 1 thought that if people couldn't grasp what this could mean for their own experience using buses, many would not engage. Their presentation majored on the practical implications rather than the strategic case, though they thought information on the latter should be available for those who wanted it. Group 2 talked about the need to compare and contrast the 'now' and the 'new' under franchising.

Most of the groups did explore ways of communicating the core features of a franchised model and aspects of the strategic case, though avoiding this language. Group 2 focused on accountability, consistency, centralised planning and the protection of less popular routes - they thought that explaining these elements would attract interest from those who are not frequent bus users themselves. Group 3 used metaphors to try to convey the franchising model. They talked about the identical burgers that customers can expect from every branch of McDonalds as an example of franchising, for instance. They also talked about franchising as an umbrella under which there would be a range of standard procedures and approaches.





## Task

Panel members were asked how they would introduce the topic of bus franchising to members of the public, using the information they were given at workshop 1 and their own ideas about which elements of bus franchising were most important for people to understand and what sort of language would work best.

## Observations from the exercise (2)

Groups 3 and 4 used part of their presentations to make the case for change. Their presentations highlighted that under the current system:

- there is a lack of standard operating procedures in the current model, no single central point of contact, the barriers to greater integration across modes, and taxpayer subsidies on quieter routes going into company profits;
- the region is currently ranked second from bottom in annual bus passenger satisfaction survey;

They contrasted this with the potential of a franchised model to

- see profits reinvested into bus networks;
- improve connectivity and integration between services and modes of transport;
- improve convenience around ticketing (as with Oyster in London) and uniformity in services.