

Bus franchising will not negate need for zero-emission funding

Tim Griffen | 🕒 Published August 19, 2024



In the blink of an eye, the first month of the new government has passed with renewed promises to revolutionise public transport.

Front and centre of that agenda is **the Better Buses Bill** promised in the King's Speech. It will focus on providing more local control of bus services in England via franchising and removal of the ban on establishing new municipal operators.

Louise Haigh **highlights Transport for London** as an example of what could be replicated. She notes that the Bill will "remove barriers and empower local leaders to replicate London's world class bus network across the country, giving passengers a transport system they can truly rely on."

There is a growing feeling that franchising alone will be sold as the silver bullet to solve every challenge for the bus industry over the next decade and beyond. But there are

questions from some quarters whether in reality it may not be as revolutionary as touted.

While prominence of buses on the government's agenda is of course welcome, there has been little concrete mention of how decarbonisation will fit into these wider ambitions. The idea that franchising alone will seemingly solve the challenges associated with fleet electrification is not being realised on the ground.

Those considering franchising are mainly looking to the Transport for Greater Manchester model of full ownership of buses and depots. That leaves transport authorities with the challenge of choosing between bus franchising or procuring zero-emission vehicles in the near-term.

There is now an interesting debate: Will the passenger experience be better served through bringing bus services under local control or pursuing decarbonisation, where new EVs are more costly upfront?

With limited funds from central government and a reluctance to adopt private finance, it seems like decarbonisation may stall in the coming years as franchising takes a higher priority.

While the second rounds of the **Zero Emission Bus Regional Areas** scheme in England and the **Scottish Zero Emission Bus challenge fund** will help to quell fears of a slowdown in support for rollout in the short-term at least, there is a risk that momentum behind the transition will begin to stall in absence of new dedicated measures from governments.

This is where policy reform that failed to materialise under the previous government's National Bus Strategy, namely the consultation on BSOG reform in England and setting an end date for the sale of new non-zero-emission buses (consulted on in May 2022) comes into play.

Considerations around adopting a 'zero-emission vehicle (ZEV) mandate' for HGVs, where manufacturers are required to supply a minimum number of ZEVs annually, ramping up each year to 2030, might also be brought into play.

It is not just the financial concerns associated with fleet replacement or worries about long-term certainty that play on operators' minds. There are deeper, more strategic questions that the government must address.

Perhaps most pressing of those is accessing adequate power to electrify depots – a problem that operators are already contending with, and one that could have serious ramifications for wider bus electrification in the future if it is not resolved.

As the sector knows, a sudden shock to the economy or disruption to global supply chains can take a serious toll on operators and manufacturers. Adding delay, uncertainty and an absence of leadership to existing fragilities is not an option.

The time for the government to act is now, with detailed plans for a revolution in deploying zero-emission buses (and coaches), over the course of this parliament and beyond. Sweeping complex issues under the cover of franchising is no way forward. Time will tell if Keir Starmer's government sees that too.