

Better Buses West Yorkshire Activist Briefing

We're campaigning for better, publicly controlled buses in West Yorkshire, because our buses should be run for people not profit.

Buses really matter

They're the difference to our ability to get to work, our loved ones, the services we need, and to achieving a sustainable and healthy city. More than that, they are used most by the most vulnerable in our communities – they are a vital service, not an optional extra.

Right now, we have a chance to get a bus network that works for us as citizens.

Since 'deregulation' and privatisation 30 years ago, bus use has sharply declined, while in London (where they have a publicly controlled network), it has doubled.

Why have it fallen by so much? Because deregulation means bus companies choose their routes and fares. Private bus companies are run for profit not service – we have no say over routes and fares – despite the fact they actually get nearly half their revenue from the public purse. They cherry-pick the most profitable routes that make them mega bucks and leave public money to subsidise the rest at a price THEY set. The result is a wild west of confusing ticketing, unaffordable fares and patchy services which don't link up, and which don't serve our communities' needs.

Why now?

Since the start of the Coronavirus outbreak, bus use has been decimated. Less profitable routes are under serious threat, as government subsidies for private bus operators comes to an end in October.

However, buses are still the most used form of public transport, and they are vital to the just transition.

It's a no brainer to have a better network we have more control over. This will save us money too.

Regulating bus networks has the power to generate annual savings across the UK [of £340 million amongst](#) others things, due to the capturing of 'excess profit' according to research by *Transport for Quality of Life*. In Jersey, a regulated bus network has seen a 32.5% increase in bus ridership in 5 years. Regulating buses saved the state of Jersey [£800,000 a year](#).

Following a successful campaign led by Yorkshire & Humber TUC, the West Yorkshire Combined Authority (representing Bradford, Leeds, Wakefield, Calderdale and Huddersfield Local Authorities) voted to take the first steps towards public control of the buses – they agreed to allocated £150,000 to a statutory assessment of public transport options (see below for more info on the process for winning public control).

BUT! There is a long way to go. This decision is the first step, but it is not the final decision – WYCA could still leave the buses in the unregulated hands of private companies (this is what happened following similar efforts in Tyne & Wear in 2015) – and we know for sure that the private companies will resist regulation and public control with everything they've got.

That's why we need to campaign even more strongly FOR public control, right now.

What IS 'public control' anyway?

Under a publicly controlled network, the Local Authority would have planning powers to coordinate bus routes, and demand that private bus companies follow certain standards through contracts. Only under a publicly controlled (or owned) network, can local authorities plan the routes, tell private bus companies what routes to run and enforce standards on bus companies – for fares, routes, punctuality, almost everything. Public authorities control the revenue, and can use profitable routes to subsidise quieter but still necessary routes. Could that really work? This is already how services are run in London, and across a lot of Europe. In West Yorkshire, we deserve decent, accountable and reliable buses too!

Under current legislation (the Bus Service Act 2017), the two options available to local authorities are

1. Public control (also known as franchising or regulation) or
2. A voluntary partnership arrangement between the local authorities and private bus companies.

Partnerships are the private bus companies' preferred option, as they still choose routes and fares – and pocket the profits, rather than using the money to run less profitable services. Under a partnership, the private bus companies make voluntary offers to councils, which they can back out of later. When offered the legally binding EPS in Greater Manchester to uphold the commitments the bus companies had made in their partnerships offer, bus companies 'ruled out' this possibility.

These offers are purposefully vague and cannot offer simple one fare ticketing, a daily cap, or a joined-up, integrated network, because competition law actually makes it impossible for them to coordinate like this.

In the bus operators' partnership proposals in Greater Manchester, bus companies say they will [not run bus services if they 'are commercially not viable'](#), meaning unprofitable for them. Research by bus company Abellio just in the last few weeks showed that [95% of people in GM](#) supported the idea of subsidising bus routes which are unprofitable but necessary for the public good: 'a key feature of a franchised bus network'.

Public control is not voluntary, and can be enforced. At present, it is the only way we can ensure private bus companies deliver what we need from our buses. This is because the legislation does not allow for public *ownership* of the buses. While public ownership would of course also deliver a bus service run for people not profit, it would need a change of national legislation – a longer term goal.

Public control is possible right now, will make a huge improvement to the bus services we rely on every day, and can help us make the case for public ownership in the long term.

How will public control make my buses better?

It will mean West Yorkshire local authorities can:

- Plan and expand the network: profits can be used to subsidise less busy but much needed services, instead of bus company shareholders' pockets. Transport for Quality of Life estimates that with the money saved from bringing buses into public control, and using profits better from those busy routes, they could introduce all of the bus routes cut since 2010 across the UK.¹
- Make buses affordable – local authorities can use the profits to introduce lower fares, which have increased 55% above inflation in the last ten years across the UK. London's buses are a flat fare of £1.50 and you can hop onto a second one without paying again.
- It also makes a simple and single ticket card, with an automatic cap on spend (like London's oyster card), finally possible. Without a publicly controlled bus network, this is impossible because bus companies have to provide their own tickets.
- Routes will be able to join up with trains (and trams when we have them) more effectively too, as local authorities will plan routes and timetables, meaning quicker, easier journeys.

How do we get public control of our buses?

The process for public control is set out in the Bus Services Act:

1. **Assessment**: the first step is for West Yorkshire Combined Authority to produce an assessment of its proposed franchising scheme. This is a business case for taking public control. It also has to assess alternatives, e.g. a partnership arrangement. Current bus operators have to provide data for the Combined Authority to develop this assessment.
2. **Independent audit**: the assessment has to be independently audited.
3. **Consultation**: After this, the Combined Authority has to consult on the proposals, over 12 weeks, with local passengers, businesses and transport providers (private bus companies).
4. **Decision**: they have to take a formal decision to proceed with franchising (public control).
5. **Transition and implementation**: finally, there is a transition period of at least 6 months. At the end of this, our buses are under public control!

The West Yorkshire Combined Authority has committed to step one. This is a really exciting opportunity for us, as it is the first step to a bus service run for people not profit. But we have a long way to go! And we know that the private bus companies will resist public control, because it threatens their profits.

However, even if an authority is not 'combined' and does not have an elected Mayor, you can still appeal to the Secretary of State for these powers, as laid out in the bill [here](#).

Ultimately, we get public control by campaigning and winning!

To win this campaign, we need to stand together – bus drivers, unions, passengers and community organisations – and build public support to the point that the Combined Authority can't make any other choice.

The result of this review and the impact of covid has been stark on buses in West Yorkshire.

-Some of the language of a November 2020 [report](#) from WY Combined Authority is worrying: "**Working closely with the operators** to enable the devolution of the funding and bring back financial equilibrium is a key part of the Transport Recovery Plan."

However, there are more positive statements:

¹ http://www.transportforqualityoflife.com/u/files/160120_Building_a_world-class_bus_system_for_Britain_FINAL1.pdf, p9.

“The impact of COVID on passenger revenue and the need for ongoing public sector financial support indicates that the deregulated model is unlikely to be appropriate for the post COVID environment. Many communities where isolation is a factor of deprivation could potentially be disadvantaged by a purely market driven approach.”

“Alongside the development of an Enhanced Partnership the Combined Authority will continue to review the case for franchising and will press the Government to give local areas the freedom and funding to pursue the options appropriate to meet local needs, including public ownership.”

We need to push on this pledge to continue investigating!

It’s important to note that Rishi Sunak announced a £4 billion levelling up fund: “This is about funding the infrastructure of everyday life: Less traffic”.

We need to also push on candidate’s pledges (both Labour and Conservative!) so they feel buses should be a crucial part of their campaign commitments!

Current West Yorkshire Labour candidate’s pledges (No conservatives have put themselves in the [ring](#) as of writing)

1. Tracy Brain: “Buses should be [publicly controlled to put people before profit](#)”
2. Susan Hinchcliffe: "[Make our public transport fit](#) for purpose and affordable by getting more public control of buses"
3. Hugh Goulbourne: "[Mobility as a service](#) – putting local people in control of all means of transport"

Don’t you have to do partnerships first?

The relevant bit of the Bus Services Act 2017, section 4, is [here](#).

However, the act is clear:

“A franchising scheme may not be made unless the franchising authority or authorities have complied with the requirements in sections [123B](#) to [123G](#).”

It never says that an authority must go through a partnership first. It must instead go through the following process. This is a process which has taken years in Greater Manchester, therefore it’s all the more important that West Yorkshire begins the investigation immediately.

The act [guidance](#) is only slightly less helpful. The statement below highlights that a combined authority merely needs to show it has assessed the impacts a partnership arrangement vs franchising could have.

“The authority should also give a clear explanation of why these outcomes would not be achieved in any other way, such as the introduction of partnership arrangements with local bus operators, and the difference that access to franchising powers will make to the day-to-day experiences of bus passengers in the area.”

This is merely an assessment, which is part of the process we already know about.

When it comes to a non-combined authority applying, it does suggest that investigating partnership option will help a Secretary of State to offer consent to pursuing franchising, in this example [Cornwall](#):

“the Council is exploring a range of options for achieving its objectives **including** pilot partnership arrangements”

However yet again, this outlines 'exploring' and not necessarily dedicating itself to a partnership.

One last opinion from a public transport expert: "It's quite clear that mayoral combined authorities can go straight to franchising. There is nothing there that says you have to do partnerships first or even assess them."

What next?

Right now, we have a chance to get a bus network that works for us, not shareholders. Here's some ways you can get involved with the campaign:

- Join the call for better, publicly controlled buses by signing the petition now: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/campaigns/better-buses-yorkshire>
- Are you a member of a union? Get your branch signed up to the campaign with our model motion, and join our Better Buses Coalition group (contact glewis@tuc.org.uk)
- Are you a member of Unite? Join our monthly campaign action group (currently meeting online – contact heather.blakey@unitetheunion.org)
- Publicly support the campaign as part of the TUC coalition (groups calling for a regulated network). This could be as little as adding your logo to our website and campaign materials – contact glewis@tuc.org.uk to find out more.
- Help build public support. This could be doing street stall petitioning or online campaigning – we've got lots of ideas, but we need help! Invite the campaign group to give a talk and send a representative to our coalition meetings!
- Talk to and invite other groups to be part of the campaign more widely – are there community organisations, anti-poverty campaigns, environmental groups or other organisations in your area, who might be interested in joining the campaign?

How should I talk about the campaign? Keep it clear and keep it simple

- **Bus governance is complex, but we've got to keep it simple.** We're one of the only countries in the world that doesn't have regulated networks. It's a wild west in West Yorkshire and we see it in the way people talk about their bus service, or lack of. The main points you need to know are:
 1. A regulated bus network would be brought under public control, and fares, routes and timetables would be set by local bodies accountable to us.
 2. Regulating the network in London has meant more integrated, accountable, affordable, frequent and reliable, for people there and we deserve the same in West Yorkshire.
 3. What we have now is de-regulation. Bus companies cannot be forced to run any route they don't want to. They set the fares and the timetables, cherry picking the extra profitable routes and leaving the public purse to pick up the bill for any other routes.
- **'Regulation' is in itself hard to understand, without adding terms like 'franchising'**, so talk about *public control*, *London-style buses* (where TfL has oversight of the buses), and *regulation of the buses*. It's good to add that this is *'known as franchising'* so people recognise this word.

- **Stay on topic:** Buses, West Yorkshire, Regulation, Public Control. Public ownership is important, but right now we are campaigning for public control. We don't want to risk people thinking this is a poor alternative, as that will get in the way of winning *this* campaign.
- **Keep it friendly, future focused and positive.** Keep the solution front and centre: we are calling on the Combined Authority to make our buses better in West Yorkshire through public control.
- **It's OK to be passionate (while always evidence-based).** This is about caring, anger, hope, vision. We need to speak when we think people are not acting in our best interest.
- **Talk about 'our' bus network** in West Yorkshire, because that's who this affects, every day.

Want to find out more?

- Yorkshire and Humber TUC Better Buses campaign page
<https://www.tuc.org.uk/campaigns/better-buses-yorkshire>
- We Own It bus campaign pages
<https://weownit.org.uk/public-ownership/buses>
- Transport for Quality of Life report on building a better bus system
http://www.transportforqualityoflife.com/u/files/160120_Building_a_world-class_bus_system_for_Britain_FINAL1.pdf
- Government guidance on implementing a bus franchising scheme
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/884528/bus-services-act-2017-franchising-scheme-guidance-document.pdf
- Government overview of the 2017 Bus Services Act
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/909577/bus-services-act-2017-new-powers-and-opportunities-document.pdf

Contact the campaign

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