

Bus Franchising Proposal for the Heart of Wessex Mayoral Strategic Authority

Vision:

To create a seamless, reliable, and sustainable bus network for the Heart of Wessex region that puts passengers first. By leveraging the strengths of Dorset, Somerset, and Wiltshire, we aim to establish a world-class, integrated public transport system that connects people, places, and opportunities. Our franchising scheme will deliver clean, affordable, and accessible transport to support economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion.

Introduction

This proposal outlines the creation of a franchising scheme for the Heart of Wessex Mayoral Strategic Authority, ensuring compliance with the Bus Services Act 2017 and the **Bus Franchising Guidance** (December 2024). The scheme will replace the existing deregulated market with a more coordinated, strategic approach to bus service provision.

The Heart of Wessex faces a unique set of transport challenges, including rural connectivity, car dependency, and fragmented services. Our franchising model will address these issues, unlocking significant improvements for residents, businesses, and visitors.

Strategic Objectives

- Accessibility:** Improve connectivity across rural and urban areas, enabling people to access jobs, education, healthcare, and leisure.
 - Affordability:** Provide consistent and value-for-money ticketing options.
 - Sustainability:** Commit to a fully zero-emission bus fleet by 2035.
 - Passenger Experience:** Prioritise safety, reliability, and comfort in all services.
 - Economic Growth:** Support the region's key sectors by connecting economic hubs with workforce catchments.
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Proposed Network Design

Core Network

- High-Frequency Corridors:**
Buses will run at least every 10 minutes during peak times in key urban areas.
- Regional Connectors:**
Cross-boundary routes will link major towns, employment hubs, and key infrastructure such as airports, ports, and rail stations.

Rural Accessibility Zones (RAZs):

- Tailored services in sparsely populated areas will provide demand-responsive transport (DRT), connecting villages to key towns or transport hubs.

Integrated Transport Hubs:

Major towns will have fully integrated transport hubs where buses, trains, and active travel infrastructure converge. Features include:

- Real-time passenger information displays.
 - Safe and secure bike storage.
 - Park-and-ride schemes with dedicated bus lanes.
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Fare and Ticketing Strategy

Simplified Fare Structures:

- **Flat Fares** within towns for affordability and predictability.
- **Zonal Pricing** for regional travel, offering clear pricing for journeys crossing multiple zones.

Integrated Ticketing:

- A single ticketing system will operate across buses and trains, with daily and weekly caps.
- Smartcards and mobile apps will provide contactless payment options, while traditional tickets remain available.

Concessionary Travel:

- Enhanced concessions for young people (16-25) and job seekers to encourage mobility.
 - ENCTS concessions as currently provided.
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Zero-Emission Fleet Strategy

- **Target:** 50% of the fleet to be electric or hydrogen-powered by 2030, with 100% by 2035.
 - Charging infrastructure will be installed at depots and key termini.
 - Government funding will be leveraged to support vehicle procurement and infrastructure installation.
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Passenger-Centric Improvements

1. Real-Time Information:

- Mobile app and web platforms for live bus tracking, journey planning, and service updates.
- Real-time displays at bus stops and transport hubs.

2. Passenger Charters:

- Guaranteed standards for reliability, cleanliness, and customer service.
- Refund policies for delays over 15 minutes.

3. Enhanced Accessibility:

- Step-free access on all buses and stops.
 - Training programs for drivers to better support passengers with disabilities.
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Governance and Accountability

1. Role of the Mayor and Combined Authority:

- The Mayor will act as the ultimate decision-maker, supported by a Transport Committee comprising representatives from Dorset, Somerset, and Wiltshire Councils.

2. Passenger Representation:

- A Passenger Advisory Panel will provide ongoing feedback on service quality and ensure that users' voices shape decision-making.

3. Operator Contracts:

- Bus operators will bid for exclusive route contracts, incentivising high service standards.
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Public and Stakeholder Consultation

The combined authority will undertake a comprehensive consultation process, ensuring residents, businesses, and other stakeholders shape the final franchising scheme. Key activities include:

- Public roadshows across major towns.
 - Online surveys and feedback platforms.
 - Stakeholder workshops with local businesses, tourism bodies, and transport operators.
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Funding and Investment

The franchising scheme will be funded through:

1. Central Government Grants:

- Devolution funding for transport infrastructure.
- Access to the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) funding.

2. Local Authority Contributions:

- Contributions from Dorset, Somerset, and Wiltshire councils to support rural connectivity initiatives.

3. Private Sector Partnerships:

- Collaboration with local businesses and key industries to co-fund services to employment hubs.
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Monitoring and Evaluation

1. Performance Metrics:

- Punctuality: Target of 95% of buses running on time.
- Passenger Satisfaction: Annual surveys with a target of 90% satisfaction.
- Emissions Reduction: Annual tracking of fleet emissions.

2. Regular Reporting:

- Quarterly reports to the Transport Committee.
 - Annual progress reviews published for public access.
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Conclusion

The proposed bus franchising scheme for the Heart of Wessex Mayoral Strategic Authority is an ambitious yet achievable vision. By placing passengers at the heart of transport planning, the scheme will transform how people travel across Dorset, Somerset, and Wiltshire. It aligns with Government guidance, prioritises sustainability, and fosters local economic growth.

We look forward to working closely with Government and stakeholders to bring this proposal to life. Together, we can build a transport network worthy of the Heart of Wessex.

Appendix A – Alignment with the Bus Franchising Guidance (December 2024)

The proposed Heart of Wessex Bus Franchising Scheme will adhere to the **Bus Franchising Guidance (December 2024)** through rigorous compliance with each key stage and principle outlined in the guidance. Below, the alignment with each component of the guidance is explained in detail:

1. Establishing the Rationale for Franchising

The Bus Franchising Guidance emphasizes the importance of justifying the decision to pursue franchising.

Compliance Measures:

- **Market Failure Evidence:**
 - Current deregulated services in Dorset, Somerset, and Wiltshire demonstrate issues such as fragmented service provision, unserved rural areas, inconsistent timetables, and a lack of fare integration. These inefficiencies prevent equitable access to transport for residents and limit economic opportunities.
 - Supporting evidence will include:
 - Declining bus usage trends across the region.
 - Over-reliance on private cars in rural and semi-urban areas.
 - Public feedback citing poor service coverage and reliability.
 - **Objectives Alignment:**
 - The franchising scheme addresses the guidance’s requirement to support local transport goals.
 - Key outcomes include:
 - Increased patronage through fare simplification and service improvements.
 - Economic growth through better access to jobs and education.
 - Reduced car dependency, contributing to net-zero emissions goals.
 - **Alternatives Appraisal:**
 - The combined authority will evaluate alternatives (e.g., Enhanced Partnerships) during the development of the business case.
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2. Governance and Decision-Making

The guidance requires clear governance structures to ensure transparent decision-making.

Compliance Measures:

- **Mayoral Oversight:**
 - The franchising scheme will be approved and overseen by the Mayor of the Heart of Wessex Combined Authority, who will act as the ultimate accountable figure.
 - **Transport Committee:**
 - A dedicated Transport Committee, with representatives from Dorset, Somerset, and Wiltshire councils, will oversee the implementation and operation of the franchise.
 - Responsibilities will include tendering contracts, monitoring performance, and reporting outcomes to the Mayor.
 - **Stakeholder Engagement:**
 - Extensive consultation with bus operators, local businesses, passenger groups, and community organizations will guide decision-making.
 - A **Passenger Advisory Panel** will be created to ensure the passenger perspective informs all governance decisions.
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3. Development of the Business Case

The guidance requires the preparation of a robust business case, following HM Treasury's **Five Case Model**.

Compliance Measures:

- **Strategic Case:**
 - This proposal aligns with the Heart of Wessex's strategic objectives for transport, including improving connectivity, reducing emissions, and supporting economic growth.
 - The franchising model is uniquely suited to address the challenges of a mixed urban-rural geography.
- **Economic Case:**
 - The business case will demonstrate clear value for money through cost-benefit analysis.
 - Benefits will include:
 - Reduced congestion and pollution from modal shift to buses.
 - Increased productivity from better access to employment and services.
 - An independent economic appraisal will be commissioned to ensure credibility.
- **Financial Case:**
 - Funding sources, such as Government grants, local authority contributions, and private sector investment, will be detailed.
 - Revenue streams from fare collection under the franchising model will be forecasted to ensure long-term financial sustainability.

- **Commercial Case:**
 - Contracts will be competitively tendered to ensure high service quality and value for money.
 - Franchising will allow flexibility to adapt contracts to changing passenger needs.
 - **Management Case:**
 - A clear project plan will outline the steps for franchising implementation, including timelines, risk management strategies, and key milestones.
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4. Developing and Consulting on the Franchising Scheme

The guidance emphasises the need for public and operator consultation.

Compliance Measures:

- **Consultation Strategy:**
 - The combined authority will undertake a comprehensive consultation process in compliance with the statutory requirements of the **Bus Services Act 2017**.
 - Activities will include:
 - Public roadshows in major towns and villages.
 - Online surveys and forums.
 - Direct engagement with existing bus operators, business groups, and community organisations.
 - **Transparency:**
 - Consultation documents will clearly outline the expected benefits, costs, and risks of franchising.
 - Feedback will be documented and incorporated into the final franchising plan.
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5. Service Design and Network Planning

The guidance requires careful design of routes, timetables, and services to meet local needs.

Compliance Measures:

- **Integrated Network Design:**
 - The franchised network will be designed to address gaps in the current provision, particularly in rural areas.
 - Urban corridors will feature high-frequency services, while rural areas will benefit from demand-responsive transport (DRT).
- **Timetable Coordination:**
 - Services will be synchronised with rail timetables and other transport modes to ensure seamless multimodal travel.
- **Passenger-Centric Approach:**
 - Real-time data and passenger feedback will inform ongoing adjustments to the network.

6. Fare Integration and Ticketing

The guidance highlights the importance of simplifying fares and improving ticketing systems.

Compliance Measures:

- **Integrated Ticketing System:**
 - The franchising scheme will implement a single ticketing system across the Heart of Wessex region, allowing passengers to transfer seamlessly between buses and trains.
 - Contactless payment methods, including smartcards and mobile apps, will provide a modern and convenient user experience.
- **Fare Caps and Zonal Pricing:**
 - Daily and weekly caps will ensure affordability for regular passengers.
 - Zonal pricing will provide transparency and predictability for regional travel.

7. Contracting and Operator Collaboration

The guidance mandates that contracts are designed to encourage innovation and collaboration while maintaining accountability.

Compliance Measures:

- **Competitive Tendering:**
 - Bus operators will bid for exclusive rights to operate specific routes or areas, ensuring cost efficiency and high service standards.
- **Contractual Incentives:**
 - Contracts will include performance-based incentives for reliability, punctuality, and customer satisfaction.
 - Penalties will apply for failure to meet service standards.
- **Collaboration Framework:**
 - The combined authority will work closely with operators to encourage innovation, particularly in adopting zero-emission vehicles.

8. Zero-Emission Bus Fleet

The guidance emphasizes environmental sustainability in franchising schemes.

Compliance Measures:

- **Fleet Transition Plan:**
 - The franchising scheme will include a phased plan to transition to zero-emission buses by 2035, in line with Government targets.
 - Collaboration with manufacturers and energy providers will ensure the timely delivery of charging infrastructure.
 - **Funding Alignment:**
 - The combined authority will access Government funding streams, including the Zero Emission Bus Regional Areas (ZEBRA) scheme, to support vehicle procurement.
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9. Monitoring and Evaluation

The guidance requires robust systems to monitor and evaluate franchising outcomes.

Compliance Measures:

- **Performance Metrics:**
 - Metrics such as reliability, passenger satisfaction, and emissions reduction will be tracked quarterly.
 - **Passenger Feedback:**
 - Regular surveys and public forums will gather insights to refine services.
 - **Reporting:**
 - Annual reports on franchising performance will be submitted to the Mayor and published for public review.
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Conclusion

This franchising proposal for the Heart of Wessex fully aligns with the Bus Franchising Guidance (December 2024) by adhering to all statutory requirements, ensuring robust governance, and placing passengers at the heart of the network design. The scheme's focus on integration, sustainability, and economic growth will serve as a model for the successful implementation of bus franchising across the UK.

Appendix B - Financial Breakdown of the Proposed Heart of Wessex Bus Franchising Scheme

Below is a detailed financial breakdown of the proposed **Heart of Wessex Bus Franchising Scheme**, including estimated costs for each element of the scheme and a full explanation of where the funding will come from. These estimates are based on publicly available benchmarks, case studies from other bus franchising schemes (e.g., Greater Manchester), and regional considerations specific to Dorset, Somerset, and Wiltshire.

1. Establishing the Franchising Scheme

This involves developing the business case, consultations, legal work, and setting up the governance framework.

| Element | Estimated Cost | Funding Source |
|--|----------------|---|
| Business Case Development (Strategic, Economic, Financial, Commercial, and Management Cases) | £1.5 million | Government Grants via Devolution Funding. Local Authority Contributions (Dorset, Somerset, Wiltshire Councils share costs equally). |
| Consultation Process (Public engagement, stakeholder workshops, operator negotiations) | £500,000 | Devolution Funding and Local Authority budgets. |
| Legal and Procurement Costs (Franchising Orders, competitive tendering process) | £750,000 | Combined Authority Budget allocated for franchising. |
| Governance Setup (Transport Committee, Passenger Advisory Panel setup) | £250,000 | Local Authority Contributions and Combined Authority Reserve Funds . |

Total Cost: £3 million

2. Network Design and Service Planning

This includes route planning, timetable synchronisation, and service integration with other transport modes.

| Element | Estimated Cost | Funding Source |
|---|----------------|---|
| Network Redesign (consultant fees, regional demand assessments, timetable integration) | £2 million | Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) funding and Combined Authority Transport Budget . |
| Integration with Rail Services (scheduling coordination, multimodal ticketing implementation) | £500,000 | Department for Transport (DfT) Grants and Rail Partnerships . |
| Total Cost: £2.5 million | | |

3. Zero-Emission Fleet Transition

The transition to a zero-emission bus fleet is a core element of the franchising scheme, ensuring environmental sustainability.

| Element | Estimated Cost | Funding Source |
|---|----------------|--|
| Electric Bus Purchase (700 buses over 10 years, at £350,000 each) | £245 million | Zero Emission Bus Regional Areas (ZEBRA) Funding (£122 million), Private Operator Investment (£123 million via contracts). |
| Charging Infrastructure at Depots and Termini (35 charging hubs, at £2 million per hub) | £70 million | Devolution Transport Funding (£35 million), Local Authority Contributions (£10 million), Private Operator Partnerships (£25 million). |
| Hydrogen Bus Pilot Fleet (50 buses at £450,000 each) | £22.5 million | Innovate UK Hydrogen Grants (£15 million), Private Operators (£7.5 million). |
| Training for Drivers and Engineers on Zero-Emission Technologies | £5 million | Government Green Skills Fund, Bus Operators. |
| Total Cost: £342.5 million | | |

4. Passenger Experience Improvements

This includes investment in real-time information, fare integration, and improving accessibility.

| Element | Estimated Cost | Funding Source |
|---|----------------|--|
| Real-Time Passenger Information Systems (digital displays at 1,500 key stops and mobile apps) | £10 million | Devolution Funding (£5 million), Private Technology Partnerships (£5 million). |
| Fare Integration System (smartcards, contactless payment systems, app development) | £5 million | Combined Authority Transport Budget and BSIP funding. |
| Accessibility Upgrades (audible announcements, step-free access for 1,200 stops) | £15 million | Levelling-Up Fund (£10 million), Local Authorities (£5 million). |
| Total Cost: £30 million | | |

5. Rural Accessibility Zones (RAZs)

To ensure equitable access in sparsely populated areas, Rural Accessibility Zones (RAZs) will provide demand-responsive transport (DRT).

| Element | Estimated Cost | Funding Source |
|---|--|--|
| DRT Vehicles (electric minibuses, 200 units at £150,000 each) | £30 million | Rural Mobility Fund (£15 million), Private Operators (£10 million), Combined Authority Budget (£5 million). |
| Operational Costs (software, staffing, maintenance) | £10 million per year (5 years) = £50 million | Combined Authority Budget, Private Operators (partnership revenue sharing). |
| Total Cost: £80 million (over 5 years) | | |

6. Simplified Fare Structures

Fare structures will be simplified with capped fares, flat rates in towns, and zonal pricing for regional travel.

| Element | Estimated Cost | Funding Source |
|---|----------------|---|
| Fare Capping and Smartcard Rollout (hardware, back-end system, testing) | £7 million | BSIP Funding, Private Operators (via franchise contracts). |
| Marketing and Public Awareness Campaign | £2 million | Local Authorities, Private Sponsors. |
| Total Cost: £9 million | | |

7. Contracting and Operator Support

Contracts with private operators will incentivise performance while ensuring accountability.

| Element | Estimated Cost | Funding Source |
|--|----------------|---|
| Tendering Process Costs (competitive bidding management, performance monitoring systems) | £1 million | Combined Authority Procurement Budget. |
| Transition Support for Operators (transition from deregulated to franchised system) | £10 million | Government Franchising Support Grant. |
| Total Cost: £11 million | | |

8. Monitoring and Evaluation

Robust monitoring systems will ensure the franchise delivers value for money and meets performance targets.

| Element | Estimated Cost | Funding Source |
|---|--|--------------------------------------|
| Performance Monitoring Systems (data analytics tools, passenger satisfaction surveys) | £2 million | Devolution Transport Funding. |
| Annual Reporting and Evaluation Costs | £1 million per year (5 years) = £5 million | Combined Authority Budget. |
| Total Cost: £7 million (over 5 years) | | |

Total Estimated Scheme Cost

| Category | Cost |
|--|----------------------------|
| Establishing the Scheme | £3 million |
| Network Design and Service Planning | £2.5 million |
| Zero-Emission Fleet Transition | £342.5 million |
| Passenger Experience Improvements | £30 million |
| Rural Accessibility Zones | £80 million (over 5 years) |
| Simplified Fare Structures | £9 million |
| Contracting and Operator Support | £11 million |
| Monitoring and Evaluation | £7 million (over 5 years) |
| Grand Total: £485 million (over 10 years) | |

Funding Sources Summary

| Funding Source | Contribution |
|--|---------------------|
| Devolution Funding | £120 million |
| Zero Emission Bus Regional Areas (ZEBRA) | £122 million |
| Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) | £20 million |
| Rural Mobility Fund | £15 million |
| Levelling-Up Fund | £10 million |
| Private Operators (via franchise contracts) | £145.5 million |
| Local Authorities | £30 million |
| Innovate UK and Hydrogen Grants | £15 million |
| Passenger Revenue (over 10 years) | £7.5 million |

This diversified funding approach ensures the scheme's financial sustainability while leveraging Government support, private investment, and local contributions.

Appendix C - Optimum Frequency Guide for Town Bus Services

Below is a suggested **daytime Monday to Friday optimum frequency guide** for town bus services, categorised by population size. This guide is based on typical demand patterns and the need to balance service provision with cost-efficiency in a franchised bus network.

Optimum Frequency Guide for Town Bus Services

Population: Up to 5,000

- **Service Frequency:** Every 60–90 minutes
- **Rationale:** Smaller populations typically have lower demand. A service every 60–90 minutes ensures basic accessibility while maintaining cost-effectiveness.

Population: 5,001–10,000

- **Service Frequency:** Every 30–60 minutes
- **Rationale:** Moderate population centres require more frequent service to cater to work commutes, shopping, and other daily activities.

Population: 10,001–25,000

- **Service Frequency:** Every 20–30 minutes
- **Rationale:** Towns of this size often have more diverse trip purposes and greater demand, requiring more frequent buses to avoid overcrowding and provide convenience.

Population: 25,001–50,000

- **Service Frequency:** Every 15–20 minutes
- **Rationale:** These towns generally serve as hubs for surrounding rural areas, generating higher travel volumes. Frequent services support local commuters and visitors.

Population: 50,001–100,000

- **Service Frequency:** Every 10–15 minutes
- **Rationale:** Larger towns require frequent and reliable services to compete with car travel and support dense urban cores and frequent trips throughout the day.

Population: 100,001 and above

- **Service Frequency:** Every 5–10 minutes
 - **Rationale:** Towns of this size function as regional centres with high-density populations. Frequent services reduce waiting times and meet diverse, high-volume demand.
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Additional Considerations

1. Peak Hours:

- Increase frequency by 25–50% during peak commuter periods (7–9 AM, 4–6 PM).

2. Rural Extensions:

- Towns with rural hinterlands may require additional services at lower frequencies (e.g., every 60–90 minutes) to connect surrounding villages.

3. Seasonal Variations:

- Tourist-heavy areas (e.g., Dorset coast) may require enhanced frequencies during peak tourist seasons.

4. Bus Size:

- Adjust fleet capacity (e.g., minibuses vs. standard buses) based on expected passenger loads.

5. Demand-Responsive Transport:

- In areas with low demand (especially populations under 5,000), consider introducing on-demand services instead of fixed routes.

This guide can be adapted to local circumstances, such as employment centres, schools, or shopping districts, to optimise the efficiency and attractiveness of the bus network.

POTENTIAL HEART OF WESSEX TOWN BUS SERVICE FREQUENCIES

Taunton – Every 10-15 minutes.

Yeovil – Every 10-15 minutes.

Chippenham – Every 10-15 minutes.

Weymouth – Every 10-15 minutes.

Salisbury – Every 10-15 minutes.

Bridgwater – Every 15-20 minutes.

Frome – Every 15-20 minutes.

Trowbridge – Every 15-20 minutes.

Melksham – Every 20-30 minutes.

Bradford-on-Avon – Every 20-30 minutes.

Westbury – Every 20-30 minutes.

Warminster – Every 20-30 minutes.

Corsham – Every 20-30 minutes.

Devizes – Every 20-30 minutes.

Dorchester – Every 20-30 minutes.

Calne – Every 20-30 minutes.

Malmesbury – Every 30-60 minutes.

A high frequency interurban bus corridor plus town buses will link Wells, Glastonbury & Street.

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