
Bus Franchising

**Report on Mobilisation Period Consultation
May 2025**

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Introduction

1. As required by the Transport Act 2000 (as amended by the Bus Services Act 2017) (together **the Act**), the Greater Manchester Franchising Scheme for Buses 2021 (**Franchising Scheme**) stipulates that the minimum period that is to expire between entering into a local service contract (otherwise called as franchise contract) and the provision of services under a local service contract, shall be a period of 9 months. This is, in effect, the transition or mobilisation period, post-contract award, for bidders who win a franchise to allow them to prepare for the start of operations under a franchise contract.
2. The Act states that the mobilisation period specified in a franchising scheme must be a minimum of 6 months.
3. TfGM undertook a statutory consultation exercise on behalf of the GMCA, seeking views on a proposal to vary its Franchising Scheme by changing the minimum mobilisation period from 9 to 6 months.
4. This report explains:
 - 4.1. The consultation responses received and the main themes that respondents raised; and
 - 4.2. TfGM's response to the consultation feedback.
5. This report will form part of GMCA's response to the consultation and will be reviewed by the Mayor of Greater Manchester who will decide whether to vary the Franchising Scheme in the manner proposed.

Executive Summary

6. TfGM undertook a statutory consultation exercise on behalf of the GMCA, seeking views on a proposal to vary its Franchising Scheme by changing the minimum mobilisation period from 9 to 6 months.
7. The consultation took place between 10th February 2025 and 10th March 2025. Statutory consultees were invited to respond by completing a survey link which was sent via email.
8. In total, 4 responses (3 responses to the online survey, together with 1 written response) were received. The key themes arising from the responses focused on issues around employees and vehicles – both of which could have an impact on how long it would take a franchised operator to mobilise prior to the franchised services commencing.

Consultation Responses

9. To gain an understanding of views on the proposals, TfGM carried out the consultation between 10th February 2025 and 10th March 2025. We targeted the consultation at statutory consultees (which includes bus operators running local bus services in Greater Manchester, any local authority who may be affected by the proposal and those other groups listed in section 123E(4)).
10. The consultation was available via an online survey that was sent via email with paper copies and other formats available on request. Statutory consultees were also given the option of responding via email at mobilisationconsultation@tfgm.com. A further email was sent on the 26th February reminding consultees of the closing date and inviting them to take part.
11. In total, 4 responses (3 responses to the online survey, together with 1 written response) were received. The responses received all came from bus operators and no other statutory consultees responded to the consultation. The bus operators who responded are all operators who have been awarded at least one franchise contract in Greater Manchester. These consultation responses were reviewed in full by TfGM and have been considered as part of this report.
12. During the consultation period three statutory consultees did acknowledge the consultation but did not provide a response. This included one operator, one neighbouring local authority and Chief Constable of Police of Greater Manchester.
13. Respondents to the consultation were asked the following question:
"Please share your thoughts about TfGM's proposal to change the minimum mobilisation period of Greater Manchester's Franchising Scheme from nine months to six months."
14. The responses received by statutory consultees were primarily focused on two key issues that are important when considering how long the mobilisation period for a franchise should be – fleet and employees. Those issues and TfGM's response to those are considered below.

Fleet

15. It was recognised by respondents that vehicle lead times is one of the main drivers of the mobilisation timeline. Responses suggested that if the operator is procuring vehicles during mobilisation, then the mobilisation period will need to be longer than six months (and perhaps even longer than nine months) to allow for the vehicles to be ordered and delivered before the start of the franchise contract. On the other hand, it was accepted by respondents that if vehicles

are transferring or can be ordered in advance, then a shorter mobilisation period would be possible and could be preferable.

16. TfGM agrees with these responses and believes that they demonstrate how the mobilisation period will need to be considered as part of each procurement. TfGM is not set on a course of action with regards to mobilisation timelines and for the purposes of this consultation is only proposing a technical change to the Franchising Scheme which would allow, if appropriate in the circumstances, a mobilisation period of 6 months to be specified. TfGM will have considered fleet timelines and issues when deciding the appropriate mobilisation period for the relevant franchise procurement.

Employees

17. It was recognised by respondents that mobilisation periods are an unsettling time for staff. A longer mobilisation period can result in a greater probability of headcount changes, pay and union issues and a reduction in recruitment and training. As such, respondents said that a shorter mobilisation period would be helpful in respect of this.
18. TfGM would agree that mobilisation periods can be unsettling, but it should be recognised that the transition from the commercial network to the franchised network is likely to have been the most significant. There are now established practices and procedures to support staff that are eligible for TUPE to ensure they are clear on their position and it is hoped this will reduce uncertainty. It is correct however that a shorter mobilisation would be helpful in regards to staff.

Other comments

19. As well as the key issues on fleet and employees, respondents also raised other comments.
20. During the consultation TfGM made it clear that the mobilisation period for each franchise contract would be considered as part of each procurement. In response to this, one respondent did raise concerns and queried how meaningful any pre-market engagement on the mobilisation period would be because *"...even if TfGM agreed a longer mobilisation was necessary as a result of market feedback, it would only realise this too late in the process and be unable to offer it."* TfGM will ensure that any market engagement that is carried out for future franchise procurements will take place at an appropriate time that allows bidders to share their feedback on the proposed mobilisation period and with enough time in the process to change the mobilisation period if necessary.
21. One respondent commented that if strategic depots (which are owned by GMCA and leased to the successful franchisee) require depot and infrastructure work and upgrades, a longer

mobilisation would be preferable particularly where the operator is responsible for this, as work cannot commence until the contract has been signed.

22. Another respondent raised a similar comment in saying that there should not be shorter mobilisation periods for the large franchises but that the proposal to reduce the minimum mobilisation period to 6 months *"...allows for the flexibility to do so for simpler smaller mobilisations which do not require new vehicles (similar to London)."*
23. TfGM agree that mobilisations not requiring new vehicles would be the most suitable for the purposes of a reducing the mobilisation period to a minimum period of 6 months. This will be considered when specifying the period prior to the start of the franchise procurement.
24. There was another response which said that the cost of resourcing the mobilisation increases with time. Longer mobilisations inevitably cost more, are less efficient for the industry and delay the delivery of benefits to the customer. TfGM agrees with this response and believes this supports the proposal to reduce the minimum mobilisation period, as this will allow an appropriate period to be specified for each procurement and in these circumstances it would reduce longer mobilisation periods for franchise contracts where that is not necessary.
25. Finally, one respondent said that the mobilisation of future franchises would be significantly more straight forward than the current franchises as those were the first franchise contracts to be entered into in Greater Manchester. The respondent agreed that the minimum mobilisation period could be reduced to reflect this. TfGM agrees with this comment, as it is accepted that reducing the minimum mobilisation period will allow for some franchises to be mobilised more effectively and quickly.
26. It is also recommended that TfGM proactively engage with bus operators in advance of the start of any new Bus Franchising procurement opportunity. This will ensure that any change to a mobilisation period is understood, and operators can feedback any issues in the Market Engagement period.

Conclusion

27. In summary, the purpose of the consultation was to seek views on TfGM and GMCA changing the minimum mobilisation period that is currently specified in the Franchising Scheme. The Franchising Scheme currently specifies a minimum mobilisation period of 9 months and the proposal is that this would be changed to a minimum of 6 months.
28. It was made clear during the consultation and as part of this response that TfGM and GMCA were not proposing to specify a minimum mobilisation period of six months for all future franchising procurements. It is accepted that the mobilisation period will need to be considered on a case-by-case basis, depending on the specific factors of each procurement, to ensure that there is enough time for bidders to mobilise each franchise contract ahead of contract go live.
29. The responses to this consultation have raised comments which explain why in some cases a minimum mobilisation period of six months may be appropriate and why in some cases a longer mobilisation period would be required. For example, if TfGM and GMCA were requiring an operator to supply vehicles then a longer mobilisation time may be required to allow the successful bidder to place orders.
30. Those responses have been accepted by TfGM and it is recommended that TfGM proactively engage with bidders in advance of the start of any new bus franchising procurement opportunity. This will ensure that TfGM considers for each procurement how long the mobilisation period should be and depending on the circumstances that could result in a mobilisation period of 6 months, 9 months or even a longer period.
31. Overall, having considered the views submitted in the consultation it is recommended that the GMCA endorses the recommendations and the Mayor varies the Franchising Scheme in the manner proposed. A copy of the Franchising Scheme to be varied is attached at Appendix 1 of this report.