



The French franchising model

As more parts of the UK embrace franchising, they can learn from experience across the Channel



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► Can France's long-standing approach to franchising bus services offer useful lessons for British local authorities?

In France, the right to mobility is enshrined in law. In principle, this means that everyone should be able to access public transport—physically, financially and geographically. As a result, French local authorities have long played a central role in organising bus services within their areas, aiming to provide a credible alternative to private car use. They are responsible for determining service levels, preserving socially necessary routes and ensuring access to employment, education and essential services either through direct provision or through franchising.

The UK's Bus Services Act, passed last year, grants local authorities comparable powers, allowing them to franchise their services in whole or in part or to provide them directly. While franchising in the UK is furthest advanced in urban areas such as Greater Manchester and the Liverpool city region, it is also gathering place in more rural areas, including via the five franchising pilots. France's experience, built up over several

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decades, offers a useful point of comparison as these early schemes develop.

The roots of the French model lie in the 1960s, with the creation of urban transport areas around the country's largest cities. Then, a decisive shift came in 1982, when a decentralisation drive transferred responsibility for public transport to local authorities. During the 2000s, the legal recognition of the 'transport organising authority', followed by the 'mobility organising authority', gave local authorities a growing role in shaping transport networks within broader spatial and economic planning frameworks. By 2025, France counted around 720 local public transport authorities, covering both urban and rural areas.

While local authorities retain freedom over how services are delivered—reflecting France's constitutional principle of local

autonomy—franchising, rather than direct provision, has become the dominant model. More than three-quarters of bus services are operated under franchise contracts. These arrangements are designed to combine public control over networks and fares with private-sector operational expertise.

Authorities typically choose between gross-cost and net-cost contracts, depending on their internal capacity and the degree of integration they wish to achieve. Under gross-cost contracts, authorities retain responsibility for service planning and bear commercial and financial risk. Under net-cost contracts, these risks are largely transferred to operators. In both cases, competitive tendering plays a central role in shaping outcomes. Much of the practical expertise underpinning these

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► As British local authorities begin to make greater use of their new powers, access to experienced support in contracting strategy, change management and network planning, of the kind developed by Trans-Missions in France and now being offered by Team Mobility UK, can prove decisive in turning new statutory powers into practical, deliverable services.

Team Mobility UK, created by Trans-Missions, is a partnership combining leading UK practitioners with senior international bus experts, dedicated to supporting British local authorities in shaping and implementing effective bus strategies, including franchising.

Team Mobility UK has close links with the Bus Centre of Excellence (BCoE) since last summer, and team members attended the Quality Rural Bus conference in Hatfield and the Quality Bus conference in Portsmouth. Our experts have delivered three presentations in the last few months, on the topics of Bus Franchising practice in France, DRT in France and on the concept of free public transport in continental Europe. As active participants in the BCoE Bus Franchising Group, Team Mobility UK brings international perspectives to support BCoE's collective expertise and development.

In addition, Trans-Missions provides study visits to Lyon, Sélestat and Narbonne, enabling UK decision-makers to learn about the French franchising model in practice and to engage directly with local authorities and operators.

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models has been developed with support from specialist advisors to the public sector, such as consultancy company Trans-Missions.

Experience suggests that franchising has been particularly effective in enabling integration and increasing ridership. Road transport, including buses and coaches, increased from 46.5 to 60.7 billion passenger-kilometres between 1990 and 2019. Over the same period, bus ridership doubled, rising from 7.7 to 15.7 billion passenger-kilometres, while bus ridership in the UK declined over the same period. The examples presented below were all supported by Trans-Missions' expertise and are illustrative of what can be achieved through franchising.

Lyon

In larger urban areas, authorities have been able to align bus networks with wider objectives around passenger information, safety and network coherence, often drawing on external technical support. In the Lyon area, for example, advisory work on passenger information systems, network safety and fraud prevention contributed to the successful re-tendering of one of France's largest urban bus networks, second in scale only to the Paris region. Efforts were also made to increase the social and environmental value, with the operator committing to a 27% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and the recruitment of a minimum of 1,500 drivers over six years.

Sélestat

In rural and peri-urban areas, franchising has supported the consolidation of fragmented services and the pooling of resources across administrative boundaries, allowing small authorities to achieve economies of scale. In Sélestat, eastern France, the consolidation of several small administrative areas into a single combined transport authority enabled services to be coordinated across a wider area. Patrick Barbier, one of the local leaders, described this as a “change of scale”, extending bus coverage across previously poorly served areas and improving mobility for people without access to a car, aiding social inclusion of groups including young people and the elderly. Demand-responsive transport now serves 53 municipalities (from 500 to 5,000 inhabitants), operating Monday to Saturday from 5am to 9pm.

Narbonne

Elsewhere, franchising has been used to bring together previously separate urban and inter-urban networks under a single contract, improving service frequency and consistency while preserving employment conditions during re-tendering. In Narbonne, in the south of France, advisory support helped integrate dense urban services with longer coastal routes, resulting in improved off-peak provision and better coordination between services, even in smaller settlements. Moreover, two lines have been electrified. The franchising contract helps the local authority secure its €136m contribution over a six-year period, as commercial responsibility is transferred to the operator.

The French bus franchising model reflects a long-standing view of public transport as an essential service rather than a purely commercial activity. Many socially necessary routes are not profitable and supporting them can be costly for public authorities. In 2023, they spent around €4.9bn for this purpose (excluding the Paris Region). Fare revenues cover around 33% of operating expenditure, with prices shaped by social considerations. Yet experience shows that careful network designs supported by informed contracting strategies and competitive tendering can help authorities balance social objectives with financial stability and market discipline.

The model is not without its challenges, and outcomes vary by location and governance capacity. Nevertheless, France's experience suggests that franchising can provide a robust framework for delivering integrated transport networks where deregulated markets struggle. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

► Arnaud Léger has French and British nationalities and lives both in France and UK. He has spent his entire career of 23 years in public transport. He has 13 years of operational experience with two major transport operators, followed by five years of experience in innovation, international tenders, and supporting local authorities. Since five years, he is the managing director and co-owner of consultancy company Trans-Missions.