

STRATHCLYDE NEEDS BETTER BUSES

A joint policy briefing by Living Rent,
Get Glasgow Moving, and Common Weal

June 2026



Summary

Residents throughout Strathclyde deserve a transport network that is affordable, reliable and publicly-run

Living Rent Glasgow, Get Glasgow Moving and Common Weal call on the Scottish government to introduce immediate measures to ensure that people in Glasgow can afford to move about the city. Specifically, the Scottish Government needs to:

1. Introduce a short 'Transport (amendment) Bill' to simplify the Scottish bus franchising powers to bring them in line with England's now tried and tested Bus Services Act 2017.
2. Increase capital funding by £100 million per year over the next five years to support franchising.¹

In addition, we ask that Glasgow City Council starts the process of testing out publicly-controlled buses by **working with the Strathclyde Partnership for Transport to create a new municipal bus company to provide affordable and reliable night-time bus services across the city.**²



(1) See Centre for Cities' 'Miles Better' report, p.28:

<https://www.centreforcities.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Miles-better-October-2023.pdf>

(2) This is the agreed Action 13 of the Strathclyde Regional Bus Strategy, p.77

https://www.spt.co.uk/media/5cgj50vt/spt_strathclyde-regional-bus-strategy.pdf

Context

Strathclyde buses are mostly run by private operators, who operate high profit margins based on the public purse

Currently, the bus network across Strathclyde is privatised, run by a handful of operators such as First Bus, which provides 41% of vehicle mileage across the region, McGill's, Stagecoach and West Coast Motors. Together, they operate 82% of the bus mileage across Strathclyde.

Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT) own the subway, major bus stations such as Buchanan Street and East Kilbride, run all the school buses, and run a rural on-demand bus service called MyBus. SPT is owned and funded by 12 councils including Glasgow City Council.

Despite being a privatised network, half of bus operator revenue still comes from public sources (the Scottish Government and the 12 councils, through SPT) (see Table 1). Despite being supported in majority by public monies, these companies run high profit margins. On average, 10p for every pound of public money spent on buses in Strathclyde goes to private bus operator profits (see Table 2).

Table 1: Bus Company Income (year 2023)

Fares	£122m
Scottish Government subsidy	£119m
Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (council funding)	£13.7m
Total income per year (2023)	£255m
% Public Funding	52.00%

Source: SPT franchising options appraisal, March 2024.

Table 2: Profits by Major Bus Operators in Glasgow (2023-24)

Company Name	Accounts to year end	Operating revenue (£m)	Operating Profit EBIT (£m)	Gross Operating Profit Margin
First Glasgow No. 1	30/03/2024	108.3	11.1	10.25%
First Glasgow No. 2	30/03/2024	46.1	4.3	9.30%
McGill's	01/01/2023	57.56	1.04	1.80%
Western Stagecoach	29/04/2023	50.96	1.59	3.50%

Source: STUC report on publicly controlled buses, April 2025.

Impact on residents

Buses are expensive, unreliable and do not meet all needs in terms of routes and timings

Buses are an important form of public transport to reduce transport poverty. According to Public Health Scotland, buses form 74% of public transport journeys in Scotland and are the public transport mode used most by low-income populations, disabled people, young people and older people.³ The lack of bus services to meet people's needs causes adverse impacts including inability to access essential services and amenities, increased social isolation, and feelings of dispossession and exclusion. Vulnerable and marginalised populations are more likely to experience adverse impacts where bus services are absent, unreliable, overcrowded, unsafe or do not meet accessibility needs of disabled people. These groups benefit most from improved services or affordability.

Living Rent surveyed over 300 people about their experience of using buses in Glasgow. Many respondents, when stating what they would like to see changed, said that they would be in favour of a publicly owned, centrally run transport system. Especially after the fire beside Glasgow Central, more people were pushed to use buses. Respondents described two-hour journeys to and from work, cancelled social plans and long queues for buses that were overcrowded or failed to arrive. Many said they usually avoid buses altogether because they are “the most expensive and least reliable” form of transport in the city.

Some residents reported that their daily commute costs tripled, while others described walking long distances through areas they felt were unsafe just to reach the nearest bus stop. Others said complaints to major operator First Bus received no response.

The survey also found overwhelming dissatisfaction with bus services in the city in general. 86% said they were “very bad” or “bad”, with 10% claiming they were “satisfactory”, and 2% labelling them as “good”. No respondents said the service was excellent. Overall, respondents said that the buses were unreliable and expensive and many expressed misgivings about ever taking the bus in Glasgow. Numerous respondents said similar things to Sarah, who stated that “I avoid it like the plague unless I have no other option. They don't turn up on time, and often I'm waiting up to 45 minutes. They are extremely expensive. I'd rather walk.”

(3) <https://publichealthscotland.scot/media/37239/why-buses-matter-for-health-and-reducing-transport-poverty-summary-briefing-final.pdf>

1. Buses in Glasgow are unaffordable

In response to our survey, over a third (37%) of respondents talked about the bus being unaffordable or described the service as expensive.

Table 3 compares prices of day bus services by private operators in Glasgow with publicly-run services in Edinburgh and London. Single bus fares in Glasgow are on average twice the price of fares in London and 50% more than in Edinburgh. This is despite Glasgow residents having a lower median weekly earning (£797 per week) than both Edinburgh (£833) and London (£958).⁴

Additionally, public transport users in Glasgow are not afforded the integrated ticketing options of London and Edinburgh. Instead, they could end up having to buy multiple tickets across different providers and services (bus, subway, rail), leading to them frequently spending over £10. Jane cited this in her survey response, “I often won't use a mix of travel options (train, bus, subway) because the cumulative cost is prohibitive.”

Table 3: Day Fare Price by operator (2026)

Company	Day Single	Price-capping or integration
First Bus (private)	£3.25 (City zone)	Tap-on, tap-off (TOTO) up to day max of £6.30 in City zone; not integrated with underground, trains or other bus providers leading to people paying several 'max caps'
McGill's (private)	£3.90 (Only DaySaver offered)	No caps or TOTO options, only saver ticket packages; not integrated with underground, trains or other bus providers
Lothian Buses (public)	£2.40	£5.70 daily TOTO cap £26.50 weekly cap incl. night services; all services by Lothian integrated with Edinburgh Trams
Transport for London (franchising model)	£1.75 pay as you go (no night fare)	£5.25 daily cap for bus travel; integrated ticketing with underground, tram and train

Source: Operator websites, May 2026.

(4) See here:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/annualsurveyofhoursandearnings/2025>

2. Buses are unreliable

The high cost of buses coupled with infrequency, unreliability and a general lack of transparency when buses do not appear intensified the general sense of frustration among survey responses. Of the respondents to our survey, 54% talked about the buses being unreliable, late, difficult, inconsistent or expressed frustration at repeated cancellations.

“We pay good money for a service and we get nothing back”

Adam, survey participant

“[I]t’s always a gamble if they’ll turn up at all in the morning. I was half an hour late to work, as my usual bus at 07:27 didn’t turn up, I had to get the next one which got me in at 8:40. I then had to walk 15 mins to the office. The next day, the correct bus turns up, gets me in half an hour early. You gamble with the service and pray your boss doesn’t complain.”

Justine, survey participant

Many respondents talked about avoiding the bus or not taking the bus when they are time bound.

“[buses are] always late, often cancelled, overcrowded, very expensive and poorly maintained. You can’t actually rely on buses for any kind of time bound journey. I have a service that runs door to door between my home and work, but I prefer to take [two] forms of alternative transport or combine a 25min walk with train or subway because I can never be sure that a bus will come or that I can get on it. I hate giving my money to a private company that provides such a poor service, I’d rather it go to ScotRail or SPT.”

Alice, survey participant



3. There is a lack of democratic oversight on provision of services, leading to cuts of crucial routes

In the last year, almost 20 routes have been closed or under threat, with some only re-opening after intense political pressure (X1,⁵ X2 and 32⁶ and 208⁷ were cut in 2020, 11 night routes in 2023, the 121 this year as well as threats to the 65, the 29, 29A, 29C). Without democratic oversight, service users and workers are at the whim of private operators removing services with total disregard for the common good.

For instance, in June 2025, First Bus announced that they were going to discontinue the service 65 between the City Centre and Halfway on 13th July 2025.⁸ The service was vital in connecting some of Glasgow's most deprived working-class areas to social services, doctors, and education, as well as providing accessibility for elderly people to access town centres such as Rutherglen. After a significant campaign, including a petition set up by the local MPs which garnered thousands of signatures, First Bus announced on 4th July that they would reverse this decision but would implement a “revised timetable” running at an hourly rate.⁹

On 30th January 2026, SPT’s Operations Committee reviewed the timetable for the bus service 29, 29A and 29C.¹⁰ SPT have very little power or resources in the current privatised system to make improvements, so buses now only come at a roughly hourly rate (previously a 30-minute rate) and routes to the city centre have been cut, with only the 29C connecting to the City Centre, which finishes at 18:34. This has created what locals have called an effective curfew. Gordon McKee MP set up a petition in protest and addressed the concerns in the House of Commons.¹¹

Finally, because of the overall deregulation of the sector, all eleven night bus services were withdrawn in 2023 by First Bus citing losses despite the high profit margins outlined above. These night services were eventually reinstated between First Bus and McGill’s and only as a result of public outrage and large scale mobilisation by Unite.

(5) <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/local-news/anger-first-glasgow-scrap-x1-22310589>

(6) <https://www.glasgowtimes.co.uk/news/18579136.axing-x2-32-bus-services-will-devastating-effect-east-end/>

(7) <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/local-news/mums-hospital-transport-fears-daughter-22398868>

(8) <https://news.firstbus.co.uk/news/first-bus-to-withdraw-service-65-from-operation>

(9) https://www.firstbus.co.uk/greater-glasgow/news-and-service-updates/updates/service-65-updated#:~:text=Service%2065%20*UPDATED%20%7C%20First,access%20to%20education%20and%20employment.

(10) <https://passenger-line-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/mytrip/service/d4b3ca29-66bd-44a4-bfdd-9ea1e475a9c8-timetable-20230809-a97a7b6e.pdf>

(11) <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=934067032428591>

4. There are few night buses, and the few there are, are very expensive

The Subway runs from 06:30 to 23:40 Monday to Saturday and 10:00 to 18:12 on Sunday, meaning public transport users outside these hours are reliant on night bus services. These services are very expensive. Table 4 (below) compares prices of night services by private operators in Glasgow with publicly-run services in Edinburgh and London. McGill's night fares are 63% more expensive than Lothian Buses, and First Bus 36% more expensive.

Table 4: Night Fare Prices by operator (2026)

Company	Night Bus Single Fare	Price-capping or integration
First Bus (private)	£4.75 (6pm – 04.30am)	Tap-on, tap-off up to day max of £6.30 in City zone; not integrated with subway, trains or other bus providers
McGill's (private)	£5.70	No caps or TOTO options, only saver ticket packages; not integrated with subway, trains or other bus providers
Lothian Buses (public)	£3.50	£5.70 daily TOTO cap £26.50 weekly cap incl. night services; all services by Lothian integrated with Edinburgh Trams
Transport for London (franchising model)	£1.75 pay as you go (no set night fare)	£5.25 daily cap for bus travel (inc. night buses); integrated ticketing with underground, tram and train

Source: Operator websites, May 2026.

Several survey responses highlighted how the poor provision of night bus services impacted their social plans.

“It would save me so much more money and time which I could spend on other things that I love about Glasgow.”

Tim, survey participant

“I used to often take the night bus after club nights with friends. I DJ and would love the option of a night bus home after playing club nights, taxis back can mean spending a chunk of the money you made that night just to get home. Buses home with friends often add a lot to the night, with everyone feeling safer.”

Stevie, survey participant and local DJ

Because of the poor services, some workers are not able to get home after work, leading them to refuse shifts.

“I have to pass on shifts at work because there's no way I can get home unless I get a taxi, which I can't afford every night.”

“It's expensive at the best of times, and unreliable after a night shift. With no frequent and reliable night bus, I have to choose between waiting at the stop in the freezing cold, walking half an hour home in the dark at my own risk, or paying even more money for a taxi.”

Pete, survey respondent and Shettleston resident

Overall, the experiences of David, a care worker from Partick, reflected a number of survey responses.

“It's expensive at the best of times, and unreliable after a night shift. With no frequent and reliable night bus, I have to choose between waiting at the stop in the freezing cold, walking half an hour home in the dark at my own risk, or paying even more money for a taxi.”

David, care worker in Partick



What we need

1. Franchising across Strathclyde

Under a franchised system, the Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT) could take ownership of all bus fleets and depots in the region. They would control and plan the network to meet the public's needs. SPT could then award exclusive contracts to a private operator to operate bus services in a specific area or on specific routes, with operators bidding for these contracts. They could also award (or directly award¹²) some or all of these contracts to a new municipal operator.

This would allow SPT to better integrate buses with the rest of the transport network. It would also increase the efficiency of public spending on transport, as all fare-revenue and public subsidy would go to SPT providing far greater control and democratic oversight of how public funding is used across the region. Profits from busy routes could be used to cross-subsidise non-profitable routes.



(12) See the Public Service Obligations in Transport Regulations 2023: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2023/1369/contents>

2. Establishing a municipal bus company to take over night-time services

Current timelines state that the franchising roll-out is due to being in 2031.¹³ This could be delayed by financial issues or legal challenges from private operators. Even with SPT moving as fast as they can, a municipal bus company can - subject to funding - be established immediately.

Doing so would provide an opportunity to **test out publicly-controlled buses, laying the groundwork for franchising and address the gaps left by commercial operators.** Night services are a good testing ground for this.

In order for this to be possible, **it needs to be funded.** There are several funding options for pursuing a new municipal bus company. Notably, in Glasgow, there is

- up to £16m projected from the Visitor Levy
- £40m available from the Scottish Government's Zero Emissions Bus Funding scheme (NB: this scheme is currently funding private operators)

A municipal bus company would be mandated to operate not-for-profit and use operating profits to improve services and reduce passenger fares. Being operated by SPT would enable an integrated ticketing system to link up with the subway and allow seamless transition between late-night services. In turn, this would better support the night-time economy which is often highlighted as a major draw for tourists.

Action 13 from the approved Strathclyde Regional Bus Strategy states that SPT and Councils should "consider development of business case for small-scale municipal bus operation, alongside identification of any area-based supply side challenges identified in the process to develop franchising."¹⁴



(13) https://www.spt.co.uk/media/f0alkliy/p191225_agenda6.pdf

(14) See page 77

https://www.spt.co.uk/media/5cgj50vt/spt_strathclyde-regional-bus-strategy.pdf#page=78

3. Enable the municipal bus company to provide bus routes throughout Strathclyde

Only a fully municipally owned company can address the transport issues described above across Glasgow and Strathclyde by:

- Ensuring that prices are kept affordable and that public money is used for the public good
- Re-investing all profits into providing better services, supporting less profitable routes and ensuring people can use buses throughout the day and night

Establishing a municipal bus company in tandem with progressing on the franchising model across all of SPT is the best way to get the whole transport network back in public ownership. Indeed, it would create a positive and reinforcing cycle: setting up a municipally-run night bus route and progressing on franchising will act as a stepping stone to wider public control of buses across the SPT area.¹⁵ Indeed, franchising will provide a stable environment for a municipal bus company to expand its operations and ensure that there is democratic oversight and accountability over a key public good: transport. This bold and ambitious approach would be transformative for the region and its inhabitants.



(15) For more details on how this can be done, see Systra's Scoping study from 2022 (paragraphs 6.6.4-6.6.6). <https://www.spt.co.uk/media/hmybrt5l/bus-scoping-study-final-report-january-2022.pdf#page=49>

Resources

- Bell, R., 2025. Proposed Visitor Levy Scheme for Glasgow. Report for Glasgow City Council. Available from: https://glasgow.gov.uk/media/20544/visitor-levy-committee-report/pdf/VL_REPORT_CAC_V2_FINAL_SM_002_002.pdf?m=1751476202623
- Cargill, P., and Easton, K., 2023. Glasgow night bus U-turn from First amid collaboration with McGill's to save services. The Daily Record, 15th August. Available from: <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/scottish-news/glasgow-night-bus-u-turn-30703992>
- Get Glasgow Moving, 2025. 'The Long Road to Franchising'. Available from: <https://www.getglasgowmoving.org/evidence/busfranchising/>
- Meighan, C., 2023. First Bus scraps night services due to low passenger numbers. STV News, 10th July. Available from: ¹⁵<https://news.stv.tv/west-central/first-bus-stops-glasgow-night-bus-service-over-passenger-low-numbers>
- Paterson, S., 2022. Hospitality workers' safety campaign gets back of Glasgow Council. Glasgow Times, 8th December. Available from: <https://www.glasgowtimes.co.uk/news/23179664.hospitality-workers-safety-campaign-gets-backing-glasgow-council/>
- Strathclyde Partnership for Transport, 2025. Strathclyde Regional Bus Strategy. Available from: https://www.spt.co.uk/media/5cgj50vt/spt_strathclyde-regional-bus-strategy.pdf
- Systra, 2024. Strathclyde Regional Bus Strategy Options Appraisal. Final Report for SPT. Available from: <https://www.spt.co.uk/media/2pkj4pjr/strathclyde-regional-bus-strategy-options-appraisal-final.pdf>
- Turner, J., 2025. The Next Stop: The Case for Publicly-Owned Buses in Scotland. STUC. Available from: <https://www.stuc.org.uk/resources/the-next-stop-stuc-bus-research.pdf>

(15) For more details on how this can be done, see Systra's Scoping study from 2022 (paragraphs 6.6.4-6.6.6). <https://www.spt.co.uk/media/hmybrt5l/bus-scoping-study-final-report-january-2022.pdf#page=49>

This report was produced by Living Rent,
Common Weal and Get Glasgow Moving.

www.livingrent.org

contact@livingrent.org

Living Rent, 617,
12 South Bridge,
Edinburgh,
EH1 1DD

