UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
Estates Division

Graham Matthews BSc MBA FRICS
Director of Estates

Mrs Judith Barker,
Executive Director of Place & Connectivity

Via email to consultations@cambridgeshirepeterborough-ca.gov.uk

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Dear Mrs Barker

Cambridge and Peterborough Combined Authority, Bus Franchising: response from the University of Cambridge

Thank you for raising the profile of bus service reform through the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority's (CPCA's) consultation on franchising.

It is clear, in order to deliver against our sustainability targets the CPCA and regional partners cannot continue with the status quo as far as public transport is considered. It is in this context that the University welcomes the progress being made by the CPCA to develop and implement its bus strategy and the recent improvements such as the Tiger pass for young people and extended network and new routes.

However, whilst these short-term gains are welcomed, bus services and the current governance need to change to a systems approach, one that can offer long-term security and protection of our bus services that enable our communities to organise their lives around a robust and secure network of services that are:

- Convenient (going to the places people want and in an acceptable journey time)
- Frequent – (acceptable length of time waiting for a bus)
- Punctual – (bus arriving on time)
- Reliable (confidence in the bus service running)[1]
- Affordable – (cost and time spent travelling)

[1] CPCA Bus Strategy

Greenwich House
Madingley Road
Cambridge
CB3 0TX

Email: Graham.Matthews@admin.cam.ac.uk
www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/em

As you will be aware the University is a major employer in the Cambridge region, employing around 12,500 staff, of which 70% continue to commute on a regular basis[2] from both within the city and from the greater Cambridge hinterland, many of whom are reliant on public transport for all or part of their journey. We are also aware that many more would like the opportunity to travel by public transport, but services are not currently available or cannot be relied upon.

Whilst franchising will not solve all of these issues it will enable greater control. It will act as a catalyst to enable the CPCA to create a network for the long-term needs of our communities, that can be relied upon and, therefore, improve the quality of lives across our region and create an equitable network.

The University also understands that CPCA has overall responsibility for the development and delivery of the Greater Cambridge Transport Strategy, and whilst not within the scope of this consultation, the University would urge the CPCA to be equally bold in its response to demand management measures for Cambridge to enable an affordable and reliable public transport network to flourish.

Please see below our response to the short questionnaire consultation document. This draws on our consultation response to the CPCA's Bus Strategy in 2023 as well as the results from our staff and student surveys and feedback from our own bus service, which has seen year-on-year passenger growth[3] and now exceeds pre-covid levels.

S1. Do you have any comments generally on how well bus services are currently performing in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough?

Bus services provide an essential service in the CPCA area, and for many, including staff and students at the University, it is the only means of transport. Without an adequate bus service, quality of life is undermined, and the health and wider society impacts and implications are considerable, which in turn impact the economic success of our region.

The recently released report by the Confederation for Passenger Transport (CPT)[4] clearly shows the economic benefits (£465m) to the region of the existing bus network, however, a recent paper published by Cambridge Ahead[5] highlights the challenges of operating bus services on our congested road network, indicating that the cost of delivering services is increasing whilst the frequency and reliability are reducing. Journey times have also increased, and ridership levels (per head of population) have reduced considerably over the last 10 years.

Many of the challenges experienced on the bus network result from issues outside the control of the current operators and rely on a range of partners to create a network that supports a frequent and reliable bus service. Challenges that have yet to be overcome.

Integrated ticketing and accurate and integrated real-time information are other areas which have been explored for several years however, the current arrangements have not been fully implemented across all operators adding to the poor quality of service and increased costs for many passengers.

[2] Staff Travel Survey 2023
[3] Except for 2019/20 – 2021/22 during the Covid-19 pandemic.
[4] https://www.cpt-uk.org/news/economic-impacts-of-bus/#:~:text=For%20many%20people%2C%20buses%20are,£8.7%20billion%20per%20year.
[5] https://www.cambridgeahead.co.uk/media/2437/bus-viability-on-a-congested-network.pdf

S2. The Strategic Case says that reforming the bus market is appropriate to address the challenges facing the local bus market. Do you have any comments on this?

The region's bus service, and more broadly public transport is in crisis, creating poor connectivity which is impacting the productivity, health and well-being of our staff and students, and wider communities, as well as the environmental quality of our operational sites.

Ridership levels have reduced as have the reliability whilst the cost of maintaining the current level of service continues to rise as do journey times. This is not acceptable if we are to support an evolving economy and one that is truly sustainable and economically viable.

It is clear that to deliver against the regional partners' sustainability ambitions we cannot continue with the status quo. It is in this context that the University welcomes the progress being made to advance a more robust approach to bus service delivery and management.

The university acknowledges that the region must implement a new structure, either enhanced partnership or franchising, the status quo is not an option.

Whilst an enhanced partnership will offer an improvement over and above that current arrangement, our region needs to take control of the public transport network if we are to arrest the rapid and deepening challenges surrounding public transport services in the region that are currently being experienced, there are many.

Whilst the delivery of the current system has been achieved through informal partnerships, they are not enough, and a significantly different arrangement is required, therefore the University is supporting a Franchised Bus network for our region.

The University, through its own service, the Universal, has seen the benefits that taking greater control of service provision and subsidised fares alongside additional resources both within the University and by the operator. This has resulted in a significant shift in the success of the service over the last 10 years, which has resulted in an increase in passenger numbers of over 300%. Prior to this, the service saw, at best, ridership stagnation[6].

S3. The Economic Case says that Franchising offers better value for money to the Combined Authority than an Enhanced Partnership. Do you have any comments on this?

Based on the economic case presented in the consultation documents, the University agrees that franchising offers better value for money than an enhanced partnership arrangement.

Franchising will give the CPCA greater control over the design, implementation, and operation of the bus network. This will ensure a move away from short-term gains to long term investments that are targeted where they can generate the most significant economic, social, and environmental benefits.

It is however recognised that there are also significant risks if a holistic approach to franchising is not implemented. Concern specifically on issues that escalate the cost of delivery, such as congestion and limited bus priority across the region's network, as well as the cost to operators of recruitment and retention of drivers and upgrades of fleet and the provision of depot infrastructure. In parallel to the delivery of franchising these other issues need to be addressed.

Money raised to support bus services needs to address these wider issues, and specifically regarding congestion, and not just plough extra funds into more buses to maintain the existing services and routes.

[6] Universal annual monitoring report.

S4. The Commercial Case says that the Combined Authority would be better able to meet its commercial objectives (success factors) through Franchising compared to an Enhanced Partnership? Do you have any comments on this?

Although franchising involves more substantial operational change and requires additional resources and risk management, it will put the CPCA in a better position to deliver consistent and reliable service outcomes that meet the needs of our communities.

Franchising will give direct control over routes, fares, and service standards, and we believe it will offer the CPCA greater capacity to meet its public transport ambitions as set out in the Bus Strategy and broader Shared Ambition 2050[7] released earlier this year.

S5. The Financial Case says that Franchising carries more financial risk for the Combined Authority than an Enhanced Partnership, but offers greater control, resulting in greater benefits. Do you have any comments on the Combined Authority taking on this risk?

Acknowledging the financial risks associated with franchising, the University believes that these are worth taking and that the risks of not taking this approach are even higher.

It is however imperative that consideration is given to maximising the value of our network through a range of enhancements and bus priority measures as well as efficient savings across service delivery.

Maximising the opportunities through developer contributions to move away from short-term projects to long-term enhancements will also need careful consideration within the framework of franchising.

S6. The Management Case sets out how the Combined Authority would manage the bus network under Franchising or an Enhanced Partnership. Do you have any comments on these plans?

As indicated in the consultation document, franchising will require a significant expansion of resources and governance structures at the CPCA, and these should not be underestimated. In addition to knowledge of the franchising model, it is imperative that the CPCA engage with the wider network of support, and we encourage the CPCA to reach out to colleagues in other areas already delivering franchising, such as Manchester (GMCA), and London (TfL). In addition, we encourage the CPCA to embrace the broader knowledge and skills within the region to include local authority partners, bus operators and businesses.

From our own learning, we would encourage the CPCA to include route managers who can work directly with operators and others to ensure the day-to-day delivery reaches its potential and can address issues before they become problems that undermine the value of the network.

S7. The Combined Authority's draft Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) identifies the potential impacts of the proposed Franchising Scheme or Enhanced Partnership on people with protected characteristics. Do you have any comments on it?

We see that the franchising model offers better potential to deliver more targeted and equitable improvements across the bus network and the supporting infrastructure to include standards and consistency of reliable information, both visual and audio.

[7] Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Shared Ambition 2050

S8. To what extent do you support or oppose the introduction of the proposed Franchising Scheme?

The University strongly supports franchising and looks forward to working with the CPCA to bring forward this significant shift to public transport delivery and enable our current and future communities to reap the rewards.

Strongly support
Tend to support
Neither support nor oppose
Tend to oppose
Strongly oppose
Don't know

S9. Are there any changes that you think would improve the proposed Franchising Scheme?

Franchising should not be delivered in isolation and therefore the University requests the CPCA to seek support from the wider partnership to ensure information and local infrastructure improvement enhance the rollout of franchising. The engagement of operators and industry bodies is also imperative to support the delivery of a skilled and able workforce both within the CPCA and across the operators to include, drivers, marketers, mechanics etc. thus ensuring the future success of a bus network for the people of our region.

S10. Do you have any further comments?

The University acknowledges that franchising will take some time to implement, however, some initial steps should be taken to progress activity and ensure that the public sees the commitment to improving services and funding from the outset of any decision.

The consultation document identifies a number of exceptions to the proposed franchising schemes (the University's own Universal bus service) including those offered as private services for specific organisations. There should be engagement to identify opportunities to align these services with the public network, ensuring that they don't undermine public services but identify how future privately funded services can be integrated into the wider network, regardless of how they are funded.

It is important that all operators are supported through the changes and that bus routes and frequencies do not diminish in the short term, 'stranding' the public without services.

It is imperative that infrastructure improvements and funding models continue to be explored and delivered. Further consideration should also be given to how, as a region, we can reduce the impact of congestion on the delivery of a 'world-class' public transport system.

Operators, even under a franchise model should not be expected to simply run the services with increasing challenges and every opportunity to enhance the operability of services is taken. Opportunities should be explored to incentivise or provide enhancements for operators to ensure that they continue to enhance public services in the region beyond just delivering the services. This should include driver facilities and dedicated bus layover spaces.

Any model of delivery should have the passenger/customer at its heart, and whilst the performance of the franchise model must be monitored, the overall impacts must be assessed against the strategic vision of improved connectivity, improved quality of life and improved life chances. Lack of public transport should not be a reason for not being able to access essential services like employment, education and healthcare.

To achieve all of this will require a broad approach to delivery across all partners through the leadership of the CPCA.

Your sincerely

Graham Matthews