

# Leeds urges probe of bus franchising options

Despite partnership moves, councillors call for franchising study

## FRANCHISING

▶ A Leeds City Council scrutiny board investigating bus service provision in the city has called on the West Yorkshire Combined Authority to investigate options for franchising local bus services.

The move contrasts with the CA recently appearing to warm towards a closer working partnership in the city with dominant local operator First West Yorkshire. This relationship emerged despite frequent calls for greater bus industry regulation in the region in recent decades.

The closer relations between the two sides followed the recent award of £173.5m to the WYCA by the Department for

Transport for a string of transport improvements for Leeds. This was backed by a pledge from First to invest £71m in 284 new buses for the city, but the operator also called for continued partnership working between the public and private sectors in the city (PT159).

Members of the scrutiny board, which held a series of evidence sessions, said that they have considered the merits and the perceived benefits that franchising would bring to competition, network improvement and innovation.

They continued: "We were advised that many of the major operators, including those in Leeds, already operate under franchised systems both here in the UK and in other countries."

Councillors noted that two operators participating in the

inquiry, Tower Transit and HCT Group, "advocated franchising to reduce costs to government, improve services, generate growth in passenger numbers and help to achieve local government's social and economic policy objectives".

"Tower Transit stated that franchising would put local government in charge of what it does best: policy and strategy, and get the best out of the private sector when they compete to operate bus services," they added, noting that the franchising provisions contained within the Bus Services Act could potentially open up the market to new entrants.

However, other local operators, represented by the Association of Bus Operators of West Yorkshire (ABOWY), offered a contrasting view. "It is their perception that

franchising will have no effect on reliability and punctuality, and provide no guarantee of passenger growth," added the scrutiny board. ABOWY also questioned the capacity of authorities to deliver bus services at a time when public sector funding is constrained and the organisation also mused upon whether authorities are prepared for the level of commercial risk they could potentially be undertaking under a franchise regime.

However, councillors expressed frustration that without a directly-elected metro mayor they will be unable to press ahead with a franchised approach without final approval from the secretary of state for transport.

Despite this the scrutiny board has called on WYCA's director of transport services to fully explore all the options and requirements under the Bus Services Act for the implementation of franchising arrangements in West Yorkshire and to report back to the council in the first quarter of 2018. ■

## BLACKPOOL WINS AWARD

Firm recognised for its work with Guide Dogs

### AWARDS

▶ Council-owned bus operator Blackpool Transport was named as the winner of the Collaboration Award at the Guide Dogs Annual Awards ceremony in London last month.

The company was recognised for its work to train drivers and conductors not only to raise awareness of the issues a guide dog and their owner face whilst travelling around the town but also what they can do to make the journey experience easier.

"It has been a real team effort," said Blackpool MD Jane Cole. ■



## FIRST GAINS TWO KEY CONTRACTS

Football and festival wins for First Travel Solutions

### CONTRACTS

▶ First Travel Solutions, FirstGroup's special events and rail replacement service operations, has announced that it has gained two new contracts.

It will see First Travel Solutions supporting the 2017 Leeds Music Festival with coach travel to and from the event for the thousands of festivalgoers who are expected to attend the event over the August bank holiday weekend.

Meanwhile, the company will also support the Football Association of Wales with transport requirements for this weekend's UEFA Champions League final in Cardiff. ■