

The SEStran Regional Bus Strategy

Summary



Foreword

As Chair of SEStran, I am pleased to introduce the Regional Bus Strategy—a vital step in our ongoing commitment to delivering a high-quality, accessible, and sustainable transport network for the South East of Scotland.

The SEStran region is diverse and dynamic, encompassing urban centres, rural communities, and everything in between. Our bus network is central to connecting people with jobs, education, healthcare, and opportunity. Yet, as our region grows and changes, so too must our approach to public transport. The challenges we face—declining bus patronage, affordability, service quality, and the need to decarbonise—are significant, but so too are the opportunities.

This strategy sets out a clear vision: to provide a bus network that is affordable, reliable, and inclusive, supporting the social, economic, and environmental wellbeing of all our communities. It builds on the foundations of our Regional Transport Strategy and reflects the collaborative spirit that defines SEStran’s work with our eight local authority partners, operators, and stakeholders.

The Regional Bus Strategy is the result of robust analysis, stakeholder engagement, and a shared

ambition to do better for our region. It identifies the actions required to improve service levels, make travel more affordable, and enhance the quality of the passenger experience. It also recognises the importance of innovation—whether in ticketing, information provision, or the transition to zero-emission fleets.

Delivering this strategy will require partnership, investment, and a willingness to embrace change. SEStran stands ready to provide strategic direction and to work with all partners to ensure that the bus network meets the needs of today and tomorrow. Together, we can create a transport system that supports inclusive growth, tackles inequalities, and helps deliver a greener future for the South East of Scotland.

I commend this strategy to all our partners and stakeholders, and look forward to working together to make its vision a reality.

Cllr Sally Pattle,

Chair of the SEStran Board





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Developing the Strategy

The *Towards a World Class Bus Service* paper was presented at the SEStran Partnership Board in June 2023 outlining policy background, the role of buses, ongoing initiatives, and opportunities from the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019. It proposed actions for a world-class service and triggered development of the SEStran Regional Bus Strategy (SRBS). The SRBS also builds on the SEStran 2035 Regional Transport Strategy (RTS), a long-term vision for the region's transport system approved in March 2023.



Timeline of the Strategy Development

Summer 2024: Initial Case for Change and Vision presented to SEStran Partnership Board; strategy approved to continue.

Autumn/Winter 2024: Workshops held with local authorities, operators, and SEStran Integrated Mobility Forum to discuss draft policies and actions.

Winter 2024: Strategy reviewed by SEStran Board in meeting and through individual feedback submissions.

Spring 2025: Board and stakeholder feedback integrated into revised draft strategy.

Summer 2025: Public consultation conducted to gather views on user experience and motivations; Over 5,000 responses received.

Winter 2025: Consultation responses analysed and draft updated; further draft shared with authorities and operators for final feedback.

Strategy Finalisation: Final feedback incorporated; strategy prepared for implementation.

The Case for Change

A detailed 'Case for Change' was developed to evaluate the region's current bus network and determine what actions are needed to meet SEStran's RTS commitments. Bus services are essential for connecting people to jobs, education, healthcare, and leisure, especially for those with lower incomes. They also help promote economic inclusion, health, and equality. Challenges in the SEStran region include population growth, rising car ownership, and varied settlement patterns from urban centres to remote rural areas, all of which complicate effective bus service delivery.

Key issues identified include:

- **The supply of bus services has decreased** since its 2007–08 peak, with bus passenger numbers steadily falling over many decades—even as road and rail use rises. The rate of decline varies regionally: some areas see much lower levels of bus use while Edinburgh's network remains comparatively strong.

- **Service provision is uneven**, with many routes focused on Edinburgh, while some areas are poorly served or lack service altogether, particularly at certain times of the day or week.
- **Network delays, congestion, lack of competition in services and fares, and various passenger barriers**—such as expensive and complex ticketing, inconsistent standards, unreliable performance, and limited modal integration—have all undermined the attractiveness of bus travel, reduced passenger confidence, and contributed to negative public perceptions.

Together, these challenges have widened the gap between the current bus network and the high-quality, accessible service envisioned in the RTS.

Vision and Core Policy Areas

To address these issues, the SRBS sets out a vision and a set of core policy areas for the Strategy.

Strategy Vision:

"To provide a high-quality, affordable, accessible, and available bus network for the entire region—one that is fully integrated with other forms of transport and increases both passenger numbers and satisfaction, supporting the social, environmental, and inclusive economic development of the region."

Core Policy Areas:

Improve Level of Service

Improve Affordability

Improve Service Quality

The following sections of the strategy detail these policy areas, review the current conditions, and outline steps toward achieving a consistently high-quality bus network that meets the needs of the region.

Core Policy Area: Improve Level of Service

Why is this important, and what is the situation in the South-East of Scotland?

Although policies support less car use and more public transport, bus use in South-East Scotland has dropped, mirroring national trends. The Case for Change report links this decline to fewer services—reduced coverage, operating hours, and frequency—which makes buses less attractive and accessible. Improving supply and demand is essential to meet regional goals.

What does a high-quality level of service look like?

A strong bus network offers easy travel with full coverage across areas and times. Once basic connectivity is achieved, comfort, reliability, and quick trips become key.

What is the focus of our Strategy?

The SRBS aims to address bus service decline by setting clear principles to ensure services operate where, when, and as often as needed, helping more people to use buses. The Case for Change identified several pressing issues to be addressed:

- **Edinburgh-centric network:** Most regional bus services focus on Edinburgh, with limited links between other local authorities despite most car journeys not involving the city.
- **Rural vulnerability and inequality:** Many deprived and rural communities face poor public transport or depend on subsidised routes that are increasingly at risk from rising costs and reduced budgets. This limits access to jobs, education, and healthcare, and deepens inequality.

→ Difficult and time-consuming

journeys: Bus journeys are often two to three times longer than by car and can involve changing buses, uncertain connections, accessibility challenges, and extra costs.

Without intervention, shrinking networks could worsen regional inequity and transport poverty, entrench car dependence, and cause some local services to disappear entirely.

SRBS Policy to Improve Level of Service

- Move towards a regionally equitable level of service in terms of connectivity by settlement type, including travel between key towns in near-neighbour local authorities. This will need to recognise the resource limitations of local authorities, while accounting for the specific needs of communities.

The Concept of Providing a Regionally Equitable Level of Service

A regionally equitable level of service means that every settlement in the SEStran region should benefit from a core standard of public transport connectivity appropriate to its size and needs, with these standards regularly reviewed to reflect changes in demand, travel patterns, and resources. While rural hamlets and villages could have links to small towns or urban centres for essential access, small towns could be connected to urban centres, and these in turn interconnected. In the largest cities, key corridors could provide frequent, 'turn up and go' services. In areas with geographic constraints or low population density, flexible solutions such as Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) may be necessary to ensure adequate access.

Core Policy Area:

Improve

Affordability

Why is this important, and what is the situation in the South-East of Scotland?

Affordable bus travel is essential for accessibility, reducing inequalities, boosting ridership, driving economic growth, and promoting a shift from car use to address climate change. In South-East Scotland, high costs and limited uptake of concessionary schemes present challenges—while 83% of young people in Edinburgh use free bus travel, only 41% do so in Falkirk and Clackmannanshire. Perceptions of value also differ; over 80% of users in Midlothian and West Lothian see fares as fair, but less than 50% agree in the Scottish Borders and Falkirk. These differences risk deepening socio-economic divides, especially for deprived communities most dependent on buses.

What does an affordable look like?

The Scottish Government's Fair Fares Review aims to make public transport more affordable and accessible.

Key short-term actions include piloting area-based flat bus fares or reduced zonal integrated fares. For the medium to long term, the review recommends governance reforms, integrated national and regional ticketing and fare structures, addressing the high relative cost of public transport, and improving network stability. It also stresses the importance of maintaining concessionary travel schemes and exploring options for a national or multimodal travel scheme. These measures focus on increasing bus use and making public transport a more attractive choice.

What is the focus of our Strategy?

The SRBS aims to build on RTS policies that stress affordability for all. A core focus is ensuring regionally important journeys are viable by simplifying complex fare structures, especially for those that require multi-operator and multi-modal travel, and those least able to pay. Our survey feedback also supported prioritising fair fare structures, automatic best-value pricing, and accessible ticket purchase and fares information.

SRBS Policy to Improve Affordability

- Fares and ticketing should be straightforward to understand, easily accessible, and ensure all users can identify and obtain the best value fare for their journey, regardless of interchanging between services, operators, or modes.
- The Strategy supports greater consistency of fares and approaches to fares setting across the region.
- The Strategy supports initiatives to provide free or lower cost bus travel for those in 'transport poverty'.
- Ensure that concessionary fare schemes are equitable for both operators and eligible passengers, and that resources are targeted and allocated appropriately to ensure support is directed where it is most needed.
- The Strategy supports measures to improve the competitiveness of sustainable transport affordability relative to car use and parking fees.

Core Policy Area: Improve Service Quality

The SRBS Case for Change highlights the urgent need to improve the quality and consistency of bus services in the SEStran region, emphasised by falling passenger numbers and declining satisfaction. Improving these aspects is critical for attracting new users and enabling operators, authorities, and stakeholders to deliver better services.

The key elements required to improve the quality of the bus network across the region are listed opposite. Each element is discussed in more detail in the following sections.

- **Network Performance and Stability**
- **Ticketing**
- **Interchanges and Bus Stops**
- **Safety, Security and Inclusion**
- **Network Identity**
- **Information, Customer Service and Feedback**
- **Vehicles and Depots, and Bus Drivers**
- **Data and Monitoring**



Network Performance and Stability

Why is this important, and what is the situation in the South-East of Scotland?

Journey times, reliability, and punctuality are essential for a successful bus network. Services need to run quickly and on time, minimising cancellations or early finishes. While operators manage issues like driver absences and vehicle breakdowns, external factors such as congestion and road incidents frequently cause delays and raise costs, affecting network affordability.

Congestion, especially in Edinburgh and other cities, leads to slower, less predictable journeys. Passengers often complain about slow, indirect routes and request faster travel and better bus priority. Poor performance reduces confidence and pushes people towards other transport modes, particularly disadvantaging those reliant on buses for essential trips (e.g., children, older or disabled people, and those on low incomes).

Satisfaction with punctuality and reliability is inconsistent—ranging from 88–90% in Edinburgh, Fife, and Midlothian, to 65–70% in Clackmannanshire and Falkirk. Frequent, poorly communicated service changes also contribute to user dissatisfaction.

What does a high-quality bus network look like for network performance?

Achieving strong bus **network performance** relies on:

- Prioritising buses over cars to reduce congestion and enable predictable journey times.
- Integrating bus services with other transport modes, boosting service frequency, and providing alternatives like a 'last bus guarantee' to enhance passenger confidence and resilience.
- Quick incident response and robust enforcement of road rules, supported by cooperation between operators and authorities.
- Maintaining a well-serviced fleet and sufficient, trained drivers to ensure reliable, timely services.

Ensuring bus **network stability** depends on developing long-term, objective-led plans that incorporate forecasts for transport demand, land use, and economic trends. Nevertheless, external pressures like variable funding, evolving demand, and temporary disruptions (e.g., roadworks) often require service adjustments. To enhance stability, it is important to:

- Establish clear standards for managing changes, including consultation and transparent communication with authorities and passengers.
- Secure long-term, multi-year funding to support initiatives and avoid "funding cliff-edges" that threaten essential services.
- Minimise the frequency and scale of service changes by using fixed timetable and route change dates, allowing for better planning and communication.
- Carry out thorough consultations with communities and key stakeholders—especially those most reliant on bus services—to ensure changes are well-informed.
- Coordinate closely between bus operators, local authorities, and traffic management teams to limit disruption and provide timely, accurate information.
- Communicate changes clearly via targeted messaging, accessible channels, and consistent data sharing to maintain public confidence and protect vulnerable users.

Supporting these efforts, Section 39 of the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 empowers authorities to request essential service data from operators, providing the evidence needed to manage network stability and consider targeted interventions or subsidies. In addition, the adoption of advanced technology, such as AI and analytics, is enabling operators and authorities to better optimise timetables, improve reliability, and respond proactively to incidents—driving continuous improvement in network performance and stability.

What is the focus of our Strategy?

The SRBS aims to address problems caused by increased car use, which can slow buses and reduce their reliability, as highlighted in the National Transport Strategy 2. It supports the SEStran RTS, focusing on high-quality cross-regional corridors, bus priority in new infrastructure, and making bus travel faster than driving. The strategy includes possible Bus Rapid Transit, strict enforcement of priority measures, and reallocating road space to sustainable travel. Additional goals are better vehicle reliability, driver support, responsive incident management, and ongoing network review for stability and user trust.

SRBS Policy to improve Network Performance

- Progress the policies and actions set out in the RTS related to bus priority, road space reallocation, and bus rapid transit to reduce bus journey times and improve bus journey time reliability.
- Support a balanced approach to road space reallocation between bus and active travel schemes, as well as an increased role for bus operators in the development of road space reallocation proposals.
- Improve the performance of bus services for key regional movements and across the region in relation to reliability and punctuality by enhancing vehicle reliability, vehicle and driver availability, improving the resilience of the bus network, and by prioritising consistent bus journey times.
- Support measures to reduce car use to protect and improve bus journey times and reduce journey time variability to deliver an attractive and efficient bus network which promotes passenger growth.
- Improve the stability of the bus network by exploring enhanced processes relating to longer-term funding settlements and service guarantees, changes of service, to reduce impact on users, and improve consultation, communication and information-sharing with key stakeholders.



Ticketing

Why is this important, and what is the situation in the South-East of Scotland?

Integrated ticketing is essential for simple, affordable public transport and supports connections between buses and other modes, as emphasized by SEStran's RTS and Scotland's STPR2. In South-East Scotland, tickets are mostly limited to single operators, and multi-operator options are not widely available. While more people use contactless and smartcards here than elsewhere in Scotland, systems like *TapTapCap* that offer automatic fare capping across different operators are uncommon. This fragmented approach creates barriers for new or infrequent users of public transport.

What does high-quality Ticketing look like?

A high-quality ticketing system is based on three core principles:

- **Simplicity:** Ticket choices and purchases should be easy to navigate. Formats must suit all users, with pre-purchase options to reduce time spent buying tickets on vehicles.
- **Flexibility:** Users should be able to travel easily across different operators, transport modes, and areas.
- **Value and Affordability:** Flexible ticketing must offer value for money without significant cost premiums, be affordable compared to car travel, and provide access to free or reduced fares where eligible.

Region-wide ticketing delivers clear benefits across the UK. Systems like Transport for London's Contactless and Oyster offer smart payment, fare caps, and flexible trip options. Cities such as Liverpool, the West Midlands, and Greater Manchester also use integrated smartcards and multi-mode travel, simplifying journeys and lowering costs.

Transport Scotland's *Smart, Digital, Integrated Ticketing and Payments Delivery Strategy 2024*

outlines a decade-long plan for integrated ticketing, supported by NSTAB. The strategy emphasizes accessibility, interoperability, and value for money. Together with the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, it enhances local transport authorities' powers, promoting collaborative development of ticketing schemes under a unified national framework.

What is the focus of our Strategy?

The SRBS aims to address key ticketing challenges by prioritising integrated solutions for public transport and mixed-mode journeys throughout the region. A primary objective is to enable seamless travel across all modes and operators. As a regional partnership, SEStran is well placed to lead and coordinate these efforts.

SRBS Policy to Improve Ticketing

- Progress the policies and actions set out in the RTS related to integrated ticketing.
- Encourage a ticketing system that instils the principles of simplicity, flexibility, value and affordability for users. This should include addressing challenges for cross-boundary and regional movements, alongside a promotion of the same values at a local level.
- Work towards a fully integrated multimodal ticketing system with fair and transparent operator revenue apportionment arrangements.

Network Identity

Why is this important, and what is the situation in the South-East of Scotland?

A clear bus network identity helps users navigate complex transport systems by indicating which vehicles, tickets, information, and infrastructure are part of a unified service. Effective branding simplifies travel, especially where multiple operators and fare structures create confusion.

The SEStran region lacks this common identity; instead, passengers face a mix of separate brands that reflect fragmented management and poor integration.

What does high-quality Network Identity look like?

Network identity refers to the consistent presentation of bus services—through information at stops, vehicles, online channels, staff uniforms, and ticketing—to help passengers easily recognise and use the network.

The level of common branding varies by region, shaped by service integration, infrastructure, and operational models. Effective network identity relies on real integration of these elements. In countries like the Netherlands, well-integrated tickets and systems can make distinct network branding less important, as users expect seamless service.

What is the focus of our Strategy?

Within the SEStran region, bus services exhibit distinct identities across different operators, local authorities, and demand catchments around key centres. Beyond branding, there is significant variation in tickets, fares, and information.

Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the region is far from having a unified network identity or the necessary enablers. The SRBS focuses on outlining the policies and actions to begin exploring a regional identity for buses and other sustainable modes, considering user benefits, appropriate geography, stakeholder appetite, required changes, feasibility, resources, and leadership.

SRBS Policies to Improve Network Identity

- Promote a positive, recognisable, and trusted bus network identity across the region, delivering improved consistency for users in identifying and engaging with information, ticketing, bus stops, interchanges, vehicles, and other key network assets. The strategy recognises that unified branding may not always be practical or necessary, and will prioritise measures that deliver clear benefits to users while acknowledging operational challenges.
- Enhance the integration of bus network identity with those of other transport modes to present a cohesive and user-focused public transport system.



Information, Customer Service, and Feedback

Why is this important, and what is the situation in the South-East of Scotland?

Accessible and clear travel information is crucial for users to make informed choices about services, schedules, costs, and disruptions. Without it, people may avoid buses or other sustainable transport, especially those with mobility challenges, young people, and individuals facing social deprivation. The SEStran RTS highlights confusing information and low public transport awareness as major issues.

Strong customer service and feedback systems are needed for addressing travel problems and improving future service. In the SEStran region, these are managed by individual bus operators, resulting in inconsistent quality.

Customer charters set standards and bolster trust. However, most SEStran bus operators have separate charters, making it difficult for passengers using multiple services to understand varying commitments.

What does a high-quality Information, Customer Service, and Feedback look like?

High-quality information and customer service are fundamental for a successful, accessible bus network. To meet the needs of all users, including those less comfortable with digital tools, transport providers should:

- Ensure reliable, inclusive information.
- Offer real-time journey planners, accurate timetables, maps, and announcements, both digitally and in physical formats.
- Use clear language, inclusive icons, and provide translation services, addressing barriers for those with disabilities, language needs, or limited experience.

- Keep all information current and consistent through robust data standards and coordination.
- Support additional needs with initiatives like the Thistle Assistance Card and app for discreet assistance.
- Integrate and simplify: Present service options and fares in a clear, comparable way, minimising information overload.
- Drive continuous improvement: Encourage regular user feedback, prioritise responsive customer service, and engage underrepresented groups in decision-making.

A customer charter sets service standards, accessibility rules, safety procedures, fare policies, and support guidelines for bus networks. It covers communication, complaints, refunds, and vehicle requirements, with performance goals to ensure fair service.

Collaboration among operators, stakeholders, and passengers is essential. Ongoing feedback and regular reviews help keep the charter current and improve equity in bus services.

What is the focus of our Strategy?

The SRBS aims to improve public transport by offering accessible information and Real Time Passenger Information (RTPI) across all modes and locations. The strategy prioritises better customer service, enhanced information, and feedback, with a strong emphasis on accessibility and seamless travel, supporting initiatives like Thistle Assistance.

Although a region-wide customer charter is recognised as beneficial, differing service levels and resources make its immediate introduction impractical. SEStran is engaging stakeholders to assess the charter's potential while initially working to improve integration and users' travel experience.

SRBS Policy to Improve Information, Customer Service, and Feedback

- Progress the policies and actions from the RTS to ensure public transport information is available in a variety of accessible formats, supported by appropriate wayfinding across the network, and making improvements to real time passenger information availability and effectiveness.
- Promote a seamless and high-quality user experience for information provision, customer service, and user feedback across all stages of travel, including pre-journey planning, at the bus stop, on-board, and after travel is completed.
- Work towards the development of a region-wide Customer Charter in the long term, setting out the standards of service quality that users can expect when using the bus network.



Interchanges and Bus Stops

Why is this important, and what is the situation in the South-East of Scotland?

Interchanges like bus stations and stops are vital for passenger boarding, transfers, and connections to other transport modes. Good facilities improve travel, attract new riders, and support efficient operations.

In the SEStran region, only half of households outside Edinburgh have direct city services, with even fewer links to other major centres. Transfer satisfaction varies widely, highlighting access challenges. Park and Ride sites and mobility hubs help reduce congestion, connect car and active travel to public transport, and offer services like EV charging to support decarbonisation.

Core benefits of high-quality interchanges include:

- **Reduced congestion:** By intercepting car journeys at the edge of cities, these sites ease traffic in central areas and free space for bus priority or active travel.
- **Improved accessibility:** Suburban and rural users gain easier, more reliable access to city centres and regional destinations.
- **Faster journeys:** Bus priority infrastructure and streamlined boarding at interchanges help reduce travel times and improve punctuality.
- **Cost and environmental savings:** Shifting trips to public transport lowers personal travel costs and cuts emissions.
- **Increased ridership:** Enhanced connectivity supports higher service frequencies, benefiting the whole network.

However, challenges persist:

- **Limited funding and resources** for building and maintaining facilities.
- **Variation in quality and ownership** affecting confidence and flexibility.

- **Balancing** strategic locations, integration, and optimal use—some sites are not ideally placed or fully used.
- **Trade-offs** between direct express routes and those stopping at more interchanges.

Investment in modern, accessible, and well-integrated interchanges across the SEStran region is essential to delivering an attractive, equitable, and sustainable bus network.

What do high-quality Interchanges and Bus Stops look like?

High-quality bus stops and interchanges require accessible boarding, suitable shelters and seating, clear signage, real-time updates, ticketing, strong security, efficient layouts, cycle parking, reliable maintenance, and robust infrastructure. Interchange hubs combine bus, rail, cycling, and active travel options, sometimes offering Park and Ride or Mobility Hub services. SEStran recommends context-based hub types, standardised designs, multi-modal integration, and frequent public transport connections. Strategic studies also call for digital management, integrated ticketing, and stakeholder engagement to ensure consistent facilities across the region.

What is the focus of our Strategy?

The SEStran RTS sets out a policy that the public transport network should be physically accessible for all, including vulnerable groups. This covers stops, interchanges, bus stations, and access routes, with an action to conduct a regional audit identifying locations that do not meet accessibility requirements and creating a prioritised intervention list. Policies also include enhancing Park and Ride provision where needed to allow car journeys to transfer to public transport, and supporting behaviour change towards sustainable transport through improved infrastructure, information, innovation, and discouraging car use.

This SEStran RBS supports this by focusing on better use of existing Park and Ride assets, and improving the consistency, quality, safety, and accessibility of bus stops and interchanges across the region.

SRBS Policy to Improve Interchanges and Bus Stops

- The Strategy supports greater consistency in the provision of proportionate, high quality, safe and accessible bus stops and interchanges across the region.
- The Strategy supports measures to make better use of existing bus-based Park and Ride assets across the region by addressing the root causes of their poor performance. Sites should also be repurposed / relocated if not performing their intended role and contributing to RTS objectives.



Safety, Security, and Inclusion

Why is this important, and what is the situation in the South-East of Scotland?

The RTS highlights the need for a transport system that ensures safety, security, and inclusion for all users, especially vulnerable groups. Bus networks are essential to Scotland's goal of zero road fatalities and serious injuries by 2050.

Assessments such as EqIA, Fairer Scotland Duty, and Child Rights and Welfare informed the SRBS Case for Change and this Strategy, identifying key concerns around safety, security, and inclusion.

- **Safety concerns** reduce bus usage, especially at night in unstaffed or poorly lit areas. Only 68% of people in Scotland feel safe on evening buses, and just 58% of disabled passengers share that sentiment. Incidents have led to fewer services.
 - **Barriers for vulnerable groups** are substantial; women, older adults, young people, LGBTQ+ individuals, disabled people, and ethnic minorities face greater challenges. Harassment and hate crimes deter use, with 72% of women fearing sexual harassment, and many changing their routines for safety. Women and non-binary people feel less safe than men at night.
 - **Physical accessibility** is limited by inadequate pavements and footpaths, and lack of compliance with the Equality Act 2010, especially for those with mobility issues.
 - **Information and support accessibility** suffer due to language barriers and unclear signage.
 - **Service gaps** persist: 4% of households lack a nearby bus stop, 13% have infrequent service (rising to 20% outside Edinburgh), and evening/weekend options are worse in deprived or rural areas.
 - **Affordability issues** limit access, contributing to isolation and poorer health.
- ### What does a safe, secure and inclusive bus network look like?
- A safe, secure, and inclusive bus network not only prevents harm but ensures every user feels welcome, respected, and able to travel confidently. Drawing on public engagement, impact assessments and best practice, crucial features include:
- **Personal Safety for All:** Buses, stops, and access routes are well-designed, maintained and well-lit, with CCTV and staff presence (especially at interchanges and at night) to minimise accidents, deter crime, and address anti-social behaviour. Zero tolerance for harassment, discrimination, or violence is reinforced by clear policies and messaging, with adaptable services addressing heightened risks faced by vulnerable groups.
 - **Accessible and Inclusive by Design:** Step-free, accessible routes and stops, low-floor buses, and clear information/signage in multiple formats (visual, audio, large print, multiple languages) are prioritised. Safe, well-maintained access to and from bus stops is provided, with routes and schedules tailored to rural, off-peak, isolated, and deprived communities.
 - **Affordability and Economic Inclusion:** Simple, affordable fares ensure access to essential services, with well-promoted free or discounted travel and support for financially vulnerable groups.
 - **Culture of Respect and Empowerment:** Staff are fully trained to support diverse needs, manage incidents, and uphold codes of conduct. Confidential channels allow users to report safety or discrimination concerns, reinforced by awareness campaigns for all.

- **Partnership and Continual Improvement:** Ongoing collaboration with equality groups and communities ensures safety and inclusion are monitored, publicly reported, and continually improved based on user feedback and incident analysis.

What is the focus of our Strategy?

Ensuring the bus network is safe and secure for all is a fundamental aspect of the SEStran RTS, aligning with policies at all government levels. Key priorities include:

- **Ensure passengers always feel safe** through adequate lighting, CCTV, staff, a zero fatalities target by 2050, and interventions to reassert public confidence.

- **Full physical accessibility for all** by complying with the Equality Act 2010, and auditing stops and routes for improvements.
- **Address diverse needs** by providing clear information, affordable fares, trained staff, and promoting respect and inclusion.

The SRBS introduces specific policies and actions for safer, more accessible, and inclusive bus travel.

SRBS Policies to Improve Safety, Security, and Inclusion

- Deliver a bus network that is safe, secure, and inclusive for all users, prioritising the well-being of vulnerable groups and ensuring accessibility for individuals regardless of any disabilities or socio-economic status.
- Create a zero-tolerance environment for harassment, discrimination or violence on the bus network, including for both bus passengers and drivers.
- Safety by design shall be prioritised and integrated at every stage of the development, maintenance, or enhancement of both new and existing bus services, networks, and facilities.



Fleets, Depots and Bus Drivers

Why is this important, and what is the situation in the South-East of Scotland?

In the SEStran region, the quality of buses, adequacy of depots, and professionalism of drivers are essential for a dependable public transport network. **Vehicles** influence comfort, accessibility, and environmental impact, while **depots** support efficient operations and enable future zero-emission transitions. **Bus drivers** significantly affect passenger perceptions of safety and service.

Operators have enhanced fleets with modern amenities such as Wi-Fi and USB charging, added high-capacity buses on busy routes, and introduced electric and autonomous buses. However, many buses are still diesel-powered, and fleet standards vary; for instance, only 30% of Falkirk passengers see their buses as environmentally friendly, compared to over 60% in Edinburgh and East Lothian. Cleanliness ratings also differ widely across the region.

These disparities are linked to operators prioritising immediate operational needs over upgrades due to costs, with fleet improvements phased in gradually. Transitioning to zero-emission fleets and upgrading depots is costly and depends on grants like ScotZEB, with additional challenges like grid limitations in some areas.

While driver behaviour generates most complaints (22.5%) in Scotland, overall satisfaction in SEStran is high (87% in 2023). Nonetheless, driver shortages continue to pose reliability issues.

What Does a High-Quality Bus Network Look Like?

A high-quality bus network in the SEStran region relies on modern fleets, effective depots, and skilled drivers.

Key elements of a successful and user-friendly **fleet** include:

- Accessible designs: low floors, ramps, wheelchair spaces, kneeling buses.

- Audio-visual and onboard technology for a better passenger experience.
- Reliable, well-maintained fleets with spare vehicles.
- Zero- or low-emission buses to reduce pollution and meet LEZ rules.
- Vehicles matched to demand—small for community/DRT, high-capacity for busy routes, and features like luggage space or toilets for airport and coach services.
- Consistent branding for a cohesive network.

Depot location and facilities are also critical. Well-placed depots minimise wasted mileage, while equipped spaces support charging, cleaning, and maintenance, especially as fleets decarbonise. Sharing depots or vehicles among operators may further boost efficiency and resilience.

Bus drivers are the public face of the service. Comprehensive customer service and accessibility training, plus empowering and retaining skilled staff, are key to ensuring positive passenger experiences and maintaining a high standard of delivery across SEStran's bus network.

What is the focus of our Strategy?

Fleets and Depots

SEStran's RTS proposes expanding bike-friendly buses, supporting fleet decarbonisation through alternative fuels and pilot projects, and standardising vehicle quality and accessibility. The SRBS prioritises a regional decarbonisation plan, shared facilities, unified technology, greater fleet sharing, and stronger network identity.

Drivers

The Strategy highlights drivers' key role in service quality and aims to improve recruitment, retention, training, and welfare. Drivers are also seen as ambassadors who help increase bus access for those needing assistance.

SRBS Policies for Fleets, Depots and Bus Drivers

- Promote the consistent deployment of high-quality, well-maintained, and appropriate vehicles across all scales of bus operations in the region, including fixed-route services and other delivery models such as Demand Responsive Transport (DRT), community transport, and the wider third sector.
- The Strategy supports greater alignment of vehicle accessibility standards with on-street infrastructure standards, to improve accessibility across the regional network.
- Drive the decarbonisation of the bus fleet at all scales of bus operation in the region. This should focus on planning, coordination, and cooperation between bus operators, government authorities, and key stakeholders to address the funding, energy, skills, and broader resource barriers for upgrading fleets, depots, and the provision of wider supporting infrastructure.
- Support mechanisms for vehicle sharing to improve fleet utilisation and service viability across sectors such as health and social care, education, and community transport.
- Improve passenger satisfaction with bus drivers and address barriers to bus usage by promoting a commitment to high-quality standards at a regional level and facilitating the implementation of measures to achieve these standards.



Data and Monitoring

Why is this important, and what is the situation in the South-East of Scotland?

Collecting and analysing data is key for improving bus networks. Data helps identify problems, guides service improvements to meet user needs, and tracks progress towards targets. While mainly used by planners and operators, this process ultimately impacts customer satisfaction.

What are the main types of data and monitoring practices used in creating a high-quality network?

- **Service and Operational Data:** Includes timetable, route, real-time location (e.g. Traveline Scotland), and disruption/event data. Used for journey planning, service optimisation, performance monitoring, and managing impacts of incidents or events.
- **Patronage, Ticketing, and Demand Data:** Covers ticketing records, patronage levels, demographic/socio-economic data, and travel demand insights from apps. Helps in understanding usage patterns, forecasting demand, and planning services and fares.
- **Customer Feedback and Engagement:** Draws on satisfaction surveys, user engagement, and feedback collected through apps and other channels. Identifies priorities for service improvement and supports targeted interventions.
- **Operational Records:** Includes fuel consumption, vehicle maintenance, and driver performance data. This information supports fleet management, identifies driver training requirements, and enables more cost-effective operations.

- **Emerging and Advanced Analytics:** Utilises artificial intelligence for advanced planning, real-time information, predictive maintenance, safety monitoring, and service personalisation.

As part of Transport Scotland's *Smart, Digital, Integrated Ticketing and Payments Delivery Strategy 2024* improvements are proposed for data, in particular in relation to Digital Travel Data Services to improve data standardisation. This also includes a consultation on bus open data legislation and introduction of regulations under Section 40 of the 2019 Act to require bus operators to provide open data on timetables, real-time information, and fares. Additionally, work will commence to push for enhanced data to be provided by operators for National Concessionary Travel Schemes, including boarding and alighting location data.

What is the focus of our Strategy?

The SEStran RBS will work with stakeholders to enhance the bus network by gathering and sharing data, setting clear standards, and monitoring performance. The strategy encourages publishing key metrics like reliability, punctuality, and fares to boost accountability and public trust, motivating operators and authorities to improve service quality for passengers.

SRBS Policy to Improve Data and Monitoring

- The strategy supports improvements to transport data collection, analysis, sharing, monitoring, and transparency on performance. This will strengthen the use of data and monitoring by key stakeholders and partnerships to improve the performance and quality of the bus network in the region.

The Role of Governance in Delivery

With the Strategy's vision and objectives in place, the next step is to consider the governance structures needed for successful delivery. Translating ambitions into action requires not just investment and engagement, but governance arrangements that shape service funding, management, and coordination at all levels.

A Changing Landscape for Governance

The delivery of bus services in Scotland is undergoing significant change, driven by ongoing challenges and opportunities at national, regional, and local levels. The Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 has given local transport authorities expanded powers, creating opportunities for innovation and improvement, but also raising questions about how best to implement these powers. Across the UK, transport authorities are exploring new governance models to address evolving policy, operational, and funding contexts, all under a trend toward greater public control.

To realise this Bus Strategy's vision, objectives, policies and actions, it is essential to consider these governance opportunities as well as the potential for reviewing the national, regional, and local division of roles, responsibilities, and pathways for future joint working.

Collaborative Working in SEStran

With seven of our local authorities, plus Dumfries and Galloway Council, SEStran developed a governance structure for effective collaboration on EV charging infrastructure. Starting with knowledge sharing, the work expanded to joint CPO procurement, now led by City of Edinburgh Council. This approach has reduced workloads, achieved economies of scale, and improved charger distribution.

SEStran also plays a key role in developing RTPI systems. Their support has enabled more efficient operations and a shared learning environment, while allowing local authorities to adapt software to local needs. SEStran continues to engage in ongoing discussions to improve the software.

The People and Place Programme, delivered regionally by RTPs, supports active travel behaviour change and local initiatives. This regional approach has received consistently positive feedback for enabling local interventions while advancing wider objectives, with shared learning embedded throughout the programme.

The Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 gives authorities major new powers for bus service delivery. Local authorities can now:

- Run their own bus services, directly or through arms-length bodies.
- Create Bus Service Improvement Partnerships (BSIPs) with operators.
- Franchise bus services, gaining control over such elements as fares, routes and timetable specifications.

Previously, local authorities' control over bus provision was mostly limited to subsidising uneconomic routes. The Act expands their ability to address network gaps and meet user needs, though few have widely adopted these powers. Some, like Scottish Borders and Highland Councils, now run services in-house.

Identified Governance Challenges

Transport Governance: A report by a short-life working group looking at the roles and responsibilities of the bodies who run Scotland's transport network (Transport Scotland, July 2019), provided a comprehensive assessment of how Scotland's transport responsibilities are allocated at national, regional, and local level (and how this varies across the country), and the barriers this creates for effective delivery.

The report set out a range of challenges, including:

- **Financial and Resource Limitations:** Financial constraints limiting investment at regional/local level; limited resource capability and skills.
- **Governance and Accountability Issues:** Out-of-date governance arrangements; inconsistent and/or unclear accountabilities; limited local accountability, leadership, and influence; lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities, particularly for the public.
- **Service and Modal Support Gaps:** Lack of support for all transport modes; difficulties working across boundaries and responsiveness to local needs; lack of ongoing maintenance of assets.
- **Strategic Disconnects:** Disconnect between long-term goals and short-term action; disconnect with planning, economic, and health agendas.
- **Private Sector and Business Engagement:** Not responsive to local business and private sector opportunities.

The report found that these issues have contributed to a persistent mismatch between aspiration and delivery, especially given Scotland's growing emphasis on environmental, social, and economic imperatives. To address these challenges, the working group suggested a number of potential improvements to transport delivery, including the need to further strengthen regional transport partnerships as key deliverers of change, which was the group's preferred option.

The Potential Value of Governance Changes for SEStran's Regional Bus Strategy

Changes to governance could help address some of these longstanding challenges. Adopting a regional governance model would allow authorities to pool resources and expertise, achieve economies of scale, and more effectively deliver cross-boundary routes with shared, complex costs. Improved regional coordination could help stabilise or expand services in areas where the commercial market alone cannot meet demand. It would also enable targeted investment to address major service gaps, such as those in rural areas or during evenings, and allow for faster, more coordinated responses to disruptions or the development of new partnerships.



SEStran's Position on Transport Governance

Given ongoing challenges and the opportunities identified by the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 and the Transport Governance Working Group, SEStran has reviewed its approach to governance reform. The persistent problems highlighted in this Bus Strategy's Case for Change—and feedback from local authorities, operators, and the public—are clear.

SEStran endorses the Working Group's view: a regional governance model warrants serious consideration. While the 2019 Act creates important new powers, existing structures don't always allow these to be used effectively where they'd help most.

Crucially, SEStran's position on governance reform and the application of Act's powers is based upon the **principle of proportionality**: enhanced regional or local powers should only be invoked to the degree necessary to overcome significant barriers to achieving the vision for the Regional Bus Strategy (and Regional Transport Strategy, as appropriate). Collaborative partnership working and engagement remain the default approach, with statutory intervention only considered if market-based or voluntary solutions have proven inadequate.

SEStran's distinctive context – including the presence of a major municipal operator that is partly owned by multiple local authorities, a diverse mix of commercial operators and some supported services – makes a proportional, partnership-led model that builds on these existing foundations particularly well-suited to the region.



Delivering the SEStran Regional Bus Strategy

SEStran will focus on cooperation with local authorities, operators, and stakeholders, putting user needs first.

Supporting Local Authorities

SEStran does not intend to override local efforts but will concentrate on regional challenges where cooperation adds value. Many authorities face rising costs and lack the resources to use the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 powers directly, given current resource constraints.

Voluntary Partnership and Evaluating its Success

SEStran will strengthen collaboration through voluntary regional efforts, such as:

- Coordinating or delivering regional services with councils seeking partnership,
- Developing joint procurement, marketing, or ticketing for seamless travel.

The strategy will remain adaptive, evolving with feedback, experience, and as new opportunities or barriers appear. If voluntary measures are insufficient, SEStran—directed by its board and councils—will consider more radical reforms, fully investigating concerns such as potential impacts on jobs or local funding. Any new regional roles would aim to support and enhance local capacity, not replace it.

SEStran would look to review the efficacy of the voluntary model every three years, in collaboration with partners, like; Transport Scotland, local authorities, operators, and our Board.

The Route to Implementation

For each core strategy area - such as network coverage, service quality, user experience, and integration—SEStran will develop a "now to future" scenario, mapping a clear trajectory from the current position toward the desired future state. Initial actions will prioritise partnership working, focusing on collaboration with local authorities, operators, and stakeholders. If significant gaps persist despite these efforts, SEStran will be prepared to consider implementing enhanced powers or adopt new governance models as appropriate to address persistent challenges.

The decision-making process will be fully transparent and will involve ongoing engagement with all relevant partners, ensuring that any changes are evidence-based and supported by those affected.

In conclusion, SEStran's approach to delivering the Regional Bus Strategy is reinforced by both the legislative opportunities provided by the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 and the insights gained from the Transport Governance Roles and Responsibilities Working Group. The proposed path is both staged and participative: it begins with a commitment to renewed partnership but remains ready to adapt governance arrangements and pragmatically use new legislative powers as required, all with the goal of achieving improved bus outcomes for communities across the region.

Read the full SEStran Regional Bus Strategy at
sestran.gov.uk/projects/regional-bus-strategy/



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