

CONSULTATION RESPONSES BETWEEN JUNE AND SEPTEMBER 2026

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Members on SEStran's response to consultations between June and September of this year.
- 1.2 The responses provided in this quarter were a mix of interviews and written responses. Where applicable, the written response has been provided as an appendix to this report.

2. RESPONSES

2.1 Regional Economic Partnership

The Partnership Director, Strategy Manager and Senior Partnership Manager met with Micro Dynamics to reply to the first stage of the Edinburgh & South East Scotland City Region Deal review of models for a Regional Economic Partnership. SEStran conveyed out the principles agreed in the Partnership Board Paper agreed on 17th July 2026.

2.2 Unpacking the tourism-transport nexus in sustainability transitions in Scotland

This research is being carried out by a team comprising of researchers from University of Aberdeen and University of Strathclyde Glasgow, transport officers from Nestrans, and funding support from Scotland Beyond Net Zero. The project aims to identify and explore the interrelationships between tourism and transport and to analyse how these interrelationships influence each sector's journey to Net Zero. The engagement was carried out via a one-hour online Teams interview with a researcher and a SEStran officer.

In the interview, the officer highlighted the work going on in the region looking at tourism and transport including active and sustainable transport projects. The officers also flagged that Visit Scotland were working on a research piece looking at moving tourists to the rail network and signposted the researchers to the lead officers on the project. The outputs of the research are being summarised into a Final Report which the team will receive once complete.

2.3 Sustainable Scotland Network (SSN) Evaluation

We were asked to participate in an interview with SSN as part of their external evaluation of their work. The interview primarily focused on the support provided to public sector organisations and how SEStran had interacted with the projects.

Primarily, SEStran officers fed back that they hadn't previously engaged with the network before due to lack of awareness about relevant resources. We highlighted that we had engaged with SSN around the statutory carbon reporting guidance which had been helpful for annual reporting requirements.

2.4 North East MSA Bus Franchising Consultation

SEStran responded to the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority's statutory consultation on its proposed Bus Franchising Scheme, drawing on experience from the South East of Scotland's Regional Bus Strategy, Regional Bus Action Plan (RBAP) and the emerging SEStran programme. The response supports the principle of bus reform where it enables public authorities and partners to plan services around passenger needs, improve integration and strengthen accountability. It highlights the importance of delivering affordable, accessible, reliable and high-quality services through coordinated action on network connectivity, ticketing, passenger information, accessibility, bus priority measures and decarbonisation. The response also emphasises the value of strong governance, partnership working and evidence-led decision making, supported by the Regional Bus Board and wider regional collaboration.

SEStran recognised the potential benefits of franchising in creating a simpler, more integrated and better-planned bus network, while noting that the success of any reform model will depend on robust financial assumptions, effective contract management and continued partnership working with operators, local authorities and neighbouring transport bodies. The response encouraged a strong focus on integration with wider public transport and active travel networks, clear and consistent passenger information, and consideration of cross-boundary travel needs. SEStran welcomed opportunities for continued engagement and knowledge sharing on governance, customer standards, fares and ticketing, network integration and the relationship between bus reform and longer-term mass transit planning.

2.5 Queen Margaret University Transport Strategy

SEStran responded to the consultation via an Online Teams meeting with the consultation lead and a representative from East Lothian Council to discuss their draft transport strategy.

In the meeting, SEStran highlighted support for the proposed objectives and welcomed the recognition that transport plays a critical role in supporting accessibility, inclusion, sustainability and the overall success of the University. SEStran encouraged QMU to position its Transport Strategy within the wider regional transport and development context.

Officers recommended the strategy should therefore align with SEStran's Regional Transport Strategy, the emerging Regional Transport Strategy Delivery Plan, SEStran, the Workforce Mobility Project and relevant local authority transport strategies. This will help ensure that campus transport improvements contribute to wider objectives around economic growth, access to education, social inclusion, sustainability and regional connectivity.

3. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 It is recommended that Members note the content of the report and its appendices.

Rebecca Smith
Senior Project & Strategy Officer

25th September 2026

Appendix 1: Consultation Response – SEStran Response to North East MSA Bus Franchising Consultation Invitation

Policy Implications	There could be implications for future iterations of the RTS, dependent on further actions by those consulting.
Financial Implications	None.
Equalities Implications	None.
Climate Change Implications	None.

Philip Meikle
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North East Mayoral Strategic Authority
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4 August 2026

Dear Philip,

Bus Reform – Statutory Consultation

Thank you for inviting the South East of Scotland Transport Partnership (SEStran) to respond to the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority's statutory consultation on the proposed Bus Franchising Scheme and Franchising Scheme Assessment. SEStran welcomes the opportunity to contribute as a statutory consultee and recognises the importance of considering the wider regional and cross-boundary implications of bus reform.

SEStran is the statutory Regional Transport Partnership for the South East of Scotland, covering the City of Edinburgh, Clackmannanshire, East Lothian, Falkirk, Fife, Midlothian, Scottish Borders and West Lothian. Our work is focused on planning and supporting a more integrated, accessible, affordable and sustainable transport system across a diverse region of urban, rural, coastal and cross-boundary travel markets.

SEStran supports the principle of bus reform where it strengthens the ability of public authorities and partners to plan networks around passenger needs, improve integration, and provide a clearer and more consistent offer to users. We recognise the challenges described in the consultation, including long-term network decline, complex fares and ticketing, inconsistent standards, and the limits of influence available through the existing deregulated model and Enhanced Partnership arrangements.

Our own Regional Bus Strategy provides a useful comparator from the South East of Scotland. It sets out a vision for a high-quality, affordable, accessible and integrated bus network, aimed at increasing passenger numbers and satisfaction while supporting social, environmental and economic development. The Strategy has been developed through extensive engagement with local authorities, operators, stakeholders and the public, including a major stakeholder survey which received over 5,000 responses.

The Strategy is built around three interdependent priorities: improving the level of service, improving affordability and ticketing, and improving service quality. In practical terms, this includes work on network connectivity, simpler and more integrated ticketing, targeted fare support for those experiencing transport poverty, bus priority measures, passenger information, interchange quality, accessibility, safety, decarbonisation and a stronger regional customer offer. A key lesson from our work is that affordability is critical, but it cannot be considered in isolation from availability, reliability, accessibility and quality.

The Regional Bus Action Plan is now translating that strategy into delivery. It provides a coordinated framework for practical action by SEStran, local authorities, bus operators and wider partners, recognising that meaningful bus improvement depends on collaboration, shared evidence, clear governance and a realistic delivery programme. SEStran has established a Regional Bus Board to support this work, bringing together operators, local authorities, user representatives and other stakeholders to shape and monitor delivery.

Alongside this, SEStran is progressing SEStran's programme-level Strategic Business Case work for South East Scotland mass transit. SEStran's responds to STPR2 Recommendation 12 for Edinburgh and South East Scotland Mass Transit and is being developed as a regionally integrated public transport programme. For the purposes of the current work, mass transit is defined broadly, including rail and tram on the highest-demand corridors, bus-based transit including regional and strategic bus services and bus rapid transit, high-quality interchanges and hubs, and supporting systems such as integrated ticketing, passenger information and priority infrastructure.

The draft SEStran's vision is for South East Scotland to have an integrated, accessible and affordable transformative public transport system that delivers seamless connectivity and supports inclusive economic growth across the region. The emerging evidence base highlights the need to address poor cross-boundary connectivity, high car dependency, unequal access to employment and services, congestion, and the risk that planned growth will reinforce car-based travel patterns unless there is a step-change in the public transport offer.

For this reason, SEStran is particularly interested in the North East MSA's proposals relating to network planning, fares and ticketing, service standards, customer information, public accountability and long-term governance. These are also central issues for our own regional bus and mass transit work. We would encourage the North East MSA to ensure that any final scheme retains a strong focus on integration with wider public transport and active travel networks, supports clear and consistent passenger information, and considers the needs of users making cross-boundary, longer-distance or multi-operator journeys.

We also encourage careful consideration of the transitional and financial risks associated with franchising. The consultation material rightly notes that franchising would give the North East MSA greater control over routes, timetables, fares and service standards, but would also involve taking on greater financial responsibility for the network. From SEStran's perspective, the strength of any reform model will depend not only on the powers available, but on the robustness of revenue assumptions, the treatment of supported services, the capacity to manage contracts effectively, and the ability to maintain partnership working with operators, local authorities and neighbouring transport bodies.

SEStran therefore supports the objectives of creating a simpler, more integrated, better planned and more accountable bus network, and we recognise the potential value of franchising as one means of achieving those outcomes. We do not offer a view on the detailed local affordability or deliverability of the proposed scheme, as those are matters for the North East MSA, its independent audit process and the local evidence base. However, we would support an approach which strengthens the role of buses as part of a wider, integrated public transport system and which maintains opportunities for cross-regional learning between transport authorities.

We would be pleased to remain engaged as your work progresses, particularly on issues where there may be shared learning around governance, customer standards, cross-boundary integration, fares and ticketing, and the relationship between bus reform and longer-term mass transit planning.

Yours sincerely,
Rachael Murphy
Strategy Manager
SEStran