The Government is currently consulting on how - and how far - responsibilities for local rail services should be devolved to PTEs (and local transport authorities elsewhere).

This follows the success of rail devolution in London, Scotland and Merseyside where investment, passenger satisfaction and performance have risen following the transfer of powers over rail networks from Whitehall.

The crucible for the rail devolution debate is Northern rail because the current franchise is coming to an end. Northern is also where some of the biggest challenges arise given the sheer number of PTEs and local transport authorities involved. It is a franchise which, under the current format for rail franchising, also gets one of the highest levels of subsidies. It is also, arguably, the franchise with the greatest potential as, alongside Trans-Pennine, it provides commuter services into Britain’s largest cities as well as key inter-urban links. Despite years of under-investment, and the franchise being let on a no-growth basis, patronage has been soaring. The modernisation of Northern would undoubtedly lead to further growth as more people commute longer distances into the North’s core cities.

The lesson of rail devolution in London, Scotland and Merseyside is that under devolution rail gets far more attention from local decision makers than it ever did when operated by remote control from Whitehall. This is because time and again local decision makers see better rail services as fundamental to their wider aspirations for sustainable economic growth.

The potential of rail devolution is not confined to the North. Bristol and the three other West of England authorities (now associate members of pteg) have big plans to take their local rail services up a level as part of the Great Western franchise. Elsewhere, the franchises which serve the West Midlands are on a longer timescale, but Centro is already developing plans for how they can have greater influence over a better local rail network for the conurbation.

Chair of pteg, Geoff Inskip, said:

‘Government is clear that for the UK economy to thrive, our cities will need to be in the vanguard of growth. For this to happen, these cities will need modern and efficient commuter rail networks, and excellent wider rail connectivity. Whilst we recognise that these are tough times and it will not be possible to transform services overnight - we will need a fair deal from national government on costs and risks to make devolution work for both passengers and for the economies of our cities.’

‘During the consultation period Northern PTEs and Centro will be further developing the proposals in their respective areas for how devolution in the North and in the West Midlands will best work in practice. Northern PTEs and Centro will also be discussing these opportunities with their neighbouring local transport authorities and partners to make sure that devolution brings benefits throughout the wider regions of which we are part.’
The urban bus (outside London) has taken a bit of a battering in recent years with falling ridership, rising fares and disappearing services. And this is despite rising levels of Government support for the industry and heavy investment in supporting infrastructure and services by PTEs.

Of course it’s not all doom and gloom and there are plenty of good bus routes out there, and areas where decline has been reversed. However, overall it’s not a pretty picture. This hurts the poorest hardest (as they are most reliant on the bus) and it holds cities back (as buses are a great way to plug new developments into the local public transport network).

The Coalition’s attempt to turn the tide is a new strategy – Green Light for Bus – which in part was a response to a multi-million pound investigation by the Competition Commission into the bus sector. The Competition Commission report itself was something of a damp squib which demanded the impossible (both more competition between operators, and more cooperation between operators) whilst setting out a fairly weak set of measures which are unlikely to do too much to achieve either objective. This left the way clear for the Government to stick to the approach set out in the Local Transport Act 2008 which gives PTEs a range of options for improving bus services - up to, and including, Quality Contracts (the franchising of networks of bus services). This was welcomed by pteg as it should be down to each PTE to determine the best approach in line with local circumstances and aspirations.

One area where the Competition Commission report looked like it could be helpful is promoting more multi-operator ticketing so that passengers have access to attractively priced tickets they can use on all buses. However, the approach being taken by DfT officials so far could best be described as minimalist. Guidance on multi-operator ticketing will emerge but it will only go as far as operators are comfortable with and legislation to force the pace is very much on the backburner.

Meanwhile the other big change signalled in the paper is the partial devolution of a chunk of existing bus subsidies known as BSOG. pteg had argued long and hard for devolution of bus subsidies so this is a major breakthrough. However, this will be devolution with many strings attached! For example some of the existing BSOG will go into a Better Bus Areas Fund which PTEs and local transport authorities elsewhere will be able to bid into. But the DfT envisages that any bid will also require operator approval (and when does approval become a veto?).

Whilst all this is going on in the background, PTEs are getting on with using the Local Transport Act 2008 powers to the full. In Merseyside, Qualifying Agreements and Statutory Quality Partnerships are leading to more cooperation between operators on the fares and services they are offering on key routes. In the West Midlands and South Yorkshire major voluntary partnerships are being expanded and rolled out, whilst in West Yorkshire and Tyne and Wear plans for Quality Contracts are well advanced, with decisions on whether to press the button on the formal process for implementing those plans due this year.
Cycling has shifted up a gear in recent months, rising up the political agenda largely as a result of the high profile ‘Cities Fit for Cycling Campaign’ run by The Times newspaper. Among other things, the campaign triggered a three hour Westminster Hall debate on cycle safety, attended by over 70 MPs across all parties.

The campaign adds to the existing momentum generated by the focus on cycling in London - from hire bikes to cycle superhighways – as well as the emphasis given to cycling nationally by Transport Minister Norman Baker and the £560m Local Sustainable Transport Fund (LSTF). DfT has also allocated £35m over the next three years for school Bikeability training and £15m to enhance cycle routes and improve cycle-rail integration.

The momentum behind cycling is also building in our cities. In the last ten years, there has been a 90 per cent increase in cycling into Leeds in the morning peak, whilst in Sheffield – England’s hilliest city – cycling levels have risen 86 per cent over the same period. The growth in cycling has been thanks, in part, to the investment that local transport authorities and their partners in the city regions are committing to cycling.

Merseyside is a good example – it is home to the largest cycle training scheme in the country, offering free cycle training to children, young people and adults as well as free bike maintenance courses. In addition, a ‘WorkWise Wheels’ scheme makes bikes available to job seekers, together with journey planning advice, to help them access interviews and job opportunities.

Merseyrail was one of three train operating companies to be awarded funding from DfT to expand their cycling activities in recognition of hard work already done. Merseyrail is one of the most cycle friendly rail operators, with hundreds of secure cycle parking spots. Bikes travel for free on their trains, each of which has sufficient space for at least four cycles.

There’s more to come as LSTF funded schemes get underway. Greater Manchester, for example, successfully secured £4.9m from LSTF for its Commuter Cycle Project which will help make cycling to work a more attractive option for more people. The project includes the provision of more than 1000 secure cycle parking spaces at a series of new cycle centres and hubs across Greater Manchester.

Elsewhere, the ‘Bike North Birmingham’ project secured a £4.1m contribution from LSTF to put towards cycle network improvements, cycle training, ‘Community Cycle Hubs’ and travel information and marketing.

Meanwhile, in South Yorkshire, cycling formed part of a successful bid for almost £5m of LSTF funding to include wheels to work and packages of cycling enhancements to key corridors where there are job and training opportunities, and people needing to access them.

pteg is working to ensure that the impacts of these schemes are captured in order to build on the already strong evidence base for investing in cycling.
Young people are speaking out about the transport decisions that affect them. Public transport, and the bus in particular, is central to the lives of many young people and their families. When asked what issues affect them, public transport is frequently at the top of young people’s list of concerns. ‘Public Transport: Cheaper, Better, Accessible’ is the UK Youth Parliament’s priority campaign for this year. Meanwhile, the newly formed Youth Select Committee, made up entirely of young people, chose public transport as their first topic for inquiry. pteg’s response to the Inquiry can be found on our website.

Young people’s transport is also rising up the agenda of Government. The Speaker of the House of Commons has given his high profile backing to the Youth Select Committee, whilst the Minister for Children and Families, Tim Loughton MP, has held a series of roundtable discussions on school transport. Transport Minister Norman Baker also takes a keen interest in this agenda. Earlier this year, he met with a group of young people to launch two complementary guides written by pteg and the National Children’s Bureau with backing from the DfT led ‘Taking Forward Transport for Children and Young People Group’. The guides, ‘How can I make buses better? A guide for young people’, and, ‘Working with young people to make buses better – A guide for the bus sector’ aim to promote dialogue and understanding between young people and those planning and delivering bus services.

This dialogue and understanding is more important than ever, given the challenges facing the bus sector in the form of cuts to bus subsidies and to local government funding. These challenges have hit young people particularly hard because much of the transport provision that benefits them is non-statutory. For example, cuts have hit the evening and weekend services they value, as well as impacted on concessionary fare offers, with many commercial and transport authority offers being cut back.

We will be exploring some of these issues in a new paper, due for publication soon, aiming to stimulate thinking on what strategies local transport authorities could adopt to provide young people with the best offer they can in the context of the cuts.

The paper will look at young people’s bus travel, their needs and priorities and how these vary according to age. It considers how transport authorities might work towards meeting these needs whilst bearing in mind tight budgets, focusing particularly on ideas to improve the affordability, availability and acceptability of bus travel for young people.

We hope that the paper will feed into the on-going Youth Select Committee Inquiry and focus attention on the increasing need to draw up both national and local strategies to support young people, through public transport, to access valuable opportunities for education, training, employment and leisure. Oral evidence sessions for the Inquiry take place in July with the final report due in November.

pteg represents the six English Passenger Transport Executives (PTEs). Bristol and the West of England, Leicester City Council, Nottingham City Council, Strathclyde Partnership for Transport and Transport for London are associate members of the group. If you would like to be added to our mailing list for future copies of the newsletter, and other information on pteg, then contact us at:

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