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Manchester-ism in Practice: Evaluating Three Greater Manchester Policies and Their Transferability within England

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ABSTRACT

In May 2026 Andy Burnham described "Manchester-ism" as a possible end of neo-liberalism. This paper evaluates three of his economic policies on four criteria: whether their stated aims were met, whether outcomes can be attributed to them, their opportunity cost, and whether they transfer within England. The Bee Network met its operational aims, with bus journeys per head up 15.5% between 2023 and 2025 against 12.2% across 88 English authorities, but attribution is only moderate because a national recovery and fare cap overlapped with franchising, and at about £182 million a year it is the most expensive of the three. The Trailblazer Devolution Deal changed how money flows but has no outcome evidence yet. The Good Employment Charter costs £550,000 a year, but its own interim evaluation finds no clear link between membership tier and improvement. Replication should be selective: the Bee Network in dense city regions, devolution where administrative capacity exists, and the Charter with a trial built in.

INTRODUCTION

In May 2026, Andy Burnham, then contesting the Makerfield by-election, stated that "Manchester-ism", a programme aimed at economic growth and social benefit [1], could be "the end of neo-liberalism" [2]. Set beside Greater Manchester's productivity growth, the largest rise in output per hour of any UK combined authority or city region between 2004 and 2023, at 31% [3, 4], the claim invites a precise question: to what extent have his economic and business policies been effective, and should they be replicated within England? By May 2025 five other English areas, including the West Midlands, had chosen bus franchising [5], and Wales legislated for it in February 2026 [6], so the question is partly what Greater Manchester's record means for the places now following it. This paper examines three policies, the Bee Network, the Trailblazer Devolution Deal and the Good Employment Charter, and judges each against four criteria: whether its stated aims were met; whether the outcomes can be causally attributed to it; its cost against the next-best use of the money; and whether the Greater Manchester context transfers elsewhere. The analysis is confined to England, where these policies have their legal basis; the Discussion looks briefly at Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Atom Valley [7] and the MBacc [8] are excluded as too recent to judge on outcomes. No policy fully qualifies. The Bee

Network merits replication only in dense city regions, devolution only where administrative capacity exists, and the Charter only if it is trialled as it spreads.

METHODS

Selection

Policies were selected on three criteria: in force for at least two years by 2025, a published aim against which outcomes can be measured, and a mainly economic or business remit. The Bee Network, the Trailblazer Devolution Deal and the Good Employment Charter meet all three; Atom Valley [7] and the MBacc [8] fail the first.

Data and Timeframe

Bus figures come from the Department for Transport's bus statistics tables BUS01e (passenger journeys), BUS01f (journeys per head) and BUS02d (vehicle-kilometres), for years ending March 2010 to 2025 [9, 10]. Productivity figures come from the ONS subregional release for 2023 [4, 11]. Staff counts come from each authority's accounts and workforce reports [12–19] and are set against the provisional 2026/27 integrated settlements published by MHCLG [20]. Devolution outcomes are taken from the National Audit Office's 2026 report [21], Charter figures from the Charter's impact page and interim evaluation [22, 23], and wage rates from the Living Wage Foundation and GOV.UK [24, 25].

Comparators

The Bee Network is compared with the other five metropolitan combined authorities: the West Midlands, West Yorkshire, Liverpool City Region, South Yorkshire and Tyne and Wear. All have run deregulated buses since 1986, have similar density, and shared the same pandemic recovery and national fare cap. Four have since chosen franchising [5], so they are a clean comparison only for data to March 2025.

Evidence Rubric

Each criterion is graded strong, moderate or weak using Table 1, and the grades are summarised in Table 2.

Table 1: Evidence rubric applied to each policy on each criterion.

Criterion	Strong	Moderate	Weak
Aims met	Published target met on official data	Aim met on the promoter's own data	No published target

Criterion	Strong	Moderate	Weak
Attribution	Counterfactual design (trial, difference-in-differences, synthetic control)	Peer comparison with shared shocks named	Pre/post or self-report only
Opportunity cost	Cost known and small relative to the alternatives, or appraisal placed on DfT value for money bands beats a named alternative	Cost known; return on the alternative known only as a range	Cost or alternative unknown
Transferability	Conditions named and shown to hold elsewhere	Conditions named, not yet tested	Conditions unspecified

Robustness

Indexing bus use to 2023 flatters authorities with the deepest pandemic trough, so results are also read against pre-pandemic levels. A synthetic control (Abadie, Diamond and Hainmueller, 2010 [26]) would be the ideal design, but the pandemic breaks the pre-treatment period and only two post-treatment years exist, so the peer comparison is the strongest attribution the data allow.

RESULTS

The Bee Network

On the four criteria (Table 1): stated aims met, strong; attribution contested, moderate; opportunity cost the highest of the three policies, moderate; context transferable to dense city regions, moderate.

The Bee Network is Greater Manchester's integrated transport system, bringing buses, Metrolink trams, cycle hire and a 1,800-mile walking and cycling network under a single coordinated brand [27]. Its centrepiece is bus franchising. Using powers granted by the Bus Services Act 2017, Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM) now specifies routes, frequencies, fares and standards and carries the revenue risk, while private operators are contracted to run services to that specification with integrated ticketing and digital access [28, 29]. This reversed the deregulated, commercially run model that had governed buses outside London since the Transport Act 1985 took effect in 1986, making Greater Manchester the first area in England to return its buses to local control in almost forty years [29]. Franchising was rolled out in three phases from September 2023 and completed in January 2025,

bringing 577 routes and 1,600 buses under public control [29, 30]. Fares are capped at £2.00 for a single adult journey and £1.00 for a child under 16 [28].

No benefit forecast was published for franchising itself, unlike the walking and cycling network discussed below, so the bus programme must be judged on its operational record. That record is strong: in the first franchised tranches the Bee Network coincided with a 14% year-on-year increase in bus patronage, raised on-time punctuality from 66% to over 80%, and extended five-minute access to high-frequency transit to 84% of residents [31]. These are pre/post figures, however. Bus use was recovering nationally over the same window (patronage in England outside London rose 7% and then 4% in the years to March 2024 and 2025 [10]) and fares were capped nationally until December 2024 [32]. Absent a synthetic control, franchising cannot claim the whole gain, which is why the cross-authority comparison below is required. The costs are real: transition cost £134.5 million and net expenditure on buses runs at around £227 million a year, on figures from the Confederation of Passenger Transport (CPT), the operators' trade body [33]. The West Midlands expects its own set-up to cost £22.5 million over three years [34], though the two figures probably cover different things. But a rising subsidy is not in itself failure. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) was already subsidising tendered services before franchising, and on its own figures franchising costs a third less per kilometre than the tendered services it replaced [35].

The comparison supports a more careful version of the claim. Greater Manchester's bus journeys per head rose 15.5% between 2023 and 2025, against 12.2% across all 88 English authorities outside London [9] (Figure 1), the largest rise among the six metropolitan combined authorities, though only 29th of the 88 in percentage terms, since several small rural areas posted larger percentages from very low bases. The result is nonetheless impressive: Greater Manchester ranks second in the volume of journeys added since 2023, behind only the West Midlands, which grew more slowly in percentage terms (16.6% against Greater Manchester's 19.3% on total journeys). Yet journeys per head remain below their pre-pandemic level [9]. This is recovery from a trough, not a reversal of the long decline.

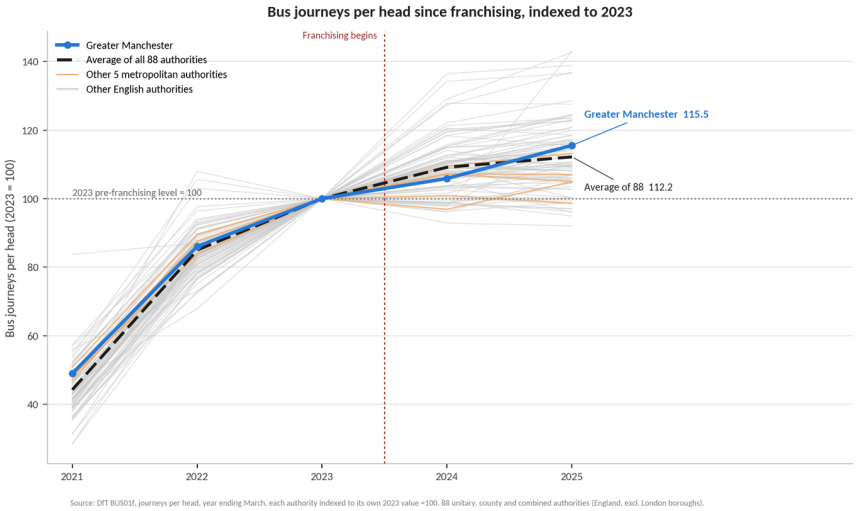


Figure 1: Bus journeys per head, indexed to 2023 = 100, Greater Manchester against the other five metropolitan authorities and all 88 English authorities outside London, years ending March 2021–2025. Source: DfT bus statistics, table BUS01f [9].

Nor was the ridership gain simply bought with extra buses. Greater Manchester's 19.3% rise in total journeys decomposes multiplicatively into a 7.5% increase in service (vehicle-kilometres run) and an 11.1% rise in boardings per vehicle-kilometre (Figure 2). This is ridership intensity rather than occupancy: it ignores trip length, so it cannot show that buses were fuller, and DfT does not publish passenger distance by authority [9]. It does show that each subsidised kilometre now produces more boardings. Only Greater Manchester and Tyne and Wear expanded service, by 7.5% and about 3%, and Greater Manchester's intensity gain was more than double Tyne and Wear's (about 5%). The other four cut service by between 2% and 4.5%, so part of their gain came from dropping their least-used routes. Against that, the West Midlands and Merseyside achieved larger intensity gains (18.6% and 14.5%) on less service, so some of Greater Manchester's gain was purchased with spending the others did not incur.

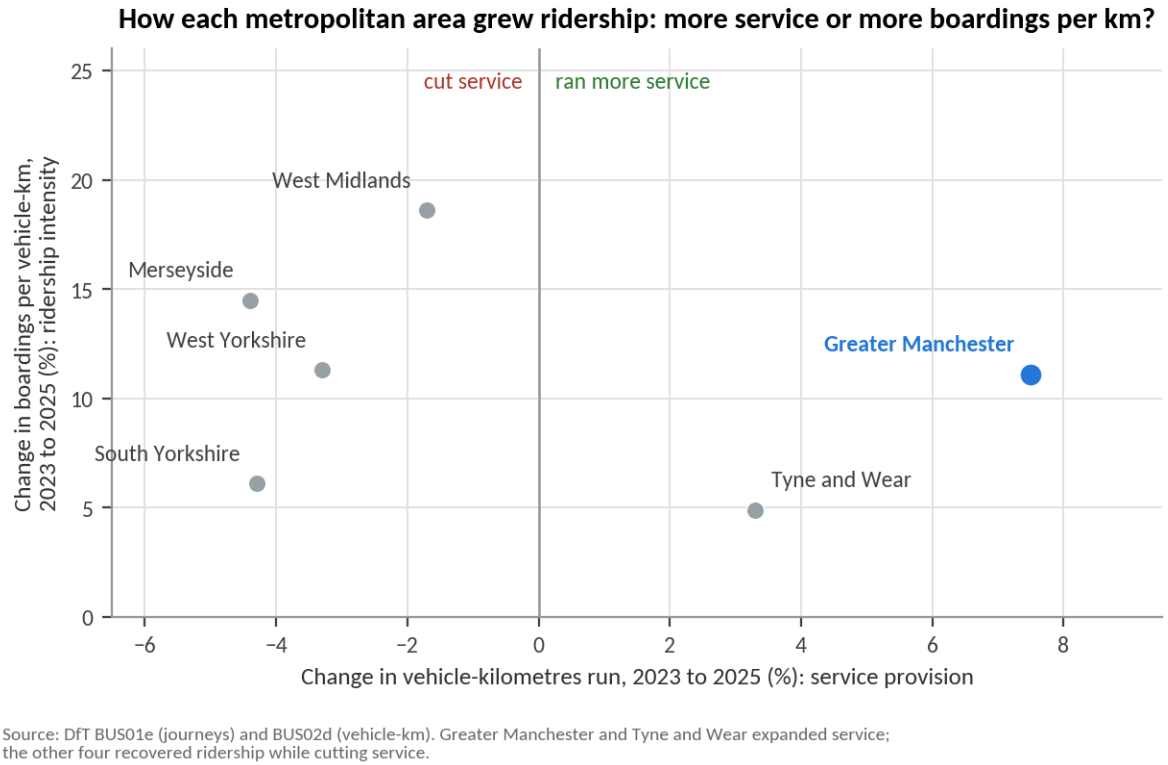


Figure 2: Decomposition of ridership growth, 2023–2025: change in vehicle-kilometres run (service provision) against change in boardings per vehicle-kilometre (ridership intensity), six metropolitan authorities. Source: DfT bus statistics, tables BUS01e and BUS02d [9].

The programme also claims progress on its aim of "reduc[ing] air pollution": by 2025 the network's 389 zero-emission buses were cutting an estimated 23,000 tonnes of CO2 a year [36], though this is the authority's own estimate against an assumed diesel counterfactual.

Replicating the model across England turns first on cost. The headline £227 million is gross rather than incremental: GMCA already spent £31.8 million on supported services in 2014/15, about £45 million in today's prices, so the true addition is roughly £182 million a year. Scaled by population to England outside London (49 million people), that is around £3.1 billion a year. Per-head scaling is, however, the wrong counterfactual: the subsidy buys trips, and trips scale with density, so £3.1 billion is an upper bound for a rollout nobody would actually design. It also excludes transition, which cost Greater Manchester £134.5 million once. Scaled instead to the other five metropolitan authorities, at about £63 per resident, the cost is around £0.6 billion a year (Appendix A), and most of that is already committed, since four of the five have chosen franchising [5].

The active travel component looks stronger on paper. The walking and cycling network projects £6.73 billion of health benefit [27] against £1.5 billion of delivery cost over ten years [37], a ratio of 4.5 to 1. No comparable appraisal exists for franchising, so this ratio does not answer the cost of franchising. Nor does it transfer cleanly. Taking it national is a benefit-transfer exercise, and Kaul et al. (2013) report a transfer error of 39% across twenty years of convergent-validity tests, rising as study and policy sites diverge [38]. Scaling by population is again the wrong method, since the driver of benefit is additional active trips, not heads. The estimate is a HEAT-type valuation of reduced mortality using the value of a statistical life, not a fiscal saving to the NHS [39, 40], and it applies a linear dose-response function to a relationship that the epidemiology finds to be concave [41], which overstates benefit where baseline activity is already high. Flyvbjerg et al. (2003) find cost overruns to be the norm in transport projects [42], and this estimate was produced by the beneficiary authority to secure funding. A defensible national ratio should therefore sit materially below Greater Manchester's own 4.5, though probably above 1.

Above 1 is in any case the wrong bar. The £182 million a year, or £0.6 billion across the other five metropolitan authorities, must beat the return on the next-best use of the money, whether rail, road maintenance or leaving it with taxpayers, and that comparison is not hypothetical. The Department for Transport's (DfT) own commissioned appraisal puts the return on local highways maintenance at a minimum of £2.20 and up to £9.10 per £1 spent [43]. Both sit in the top two of DfT's value for money bands, where 2 to 4 is "high" and above 4 "very high" [44]. Both figures are discounted, so the 4.5 ratio sits inside that range rather than above it: a discounted active-travel return may not beat simply keeping existing roads in good repair. The comparison is a sensitivity check rather than a decision rule, since the two appraisals differ in who produced them, the benefits counted and whether they measure marginal or average returns. Since the driver is additional trips rather than population, the defensible policy is phased extension to the dense city regions where the model would do most work, not a linear national scale-up. The West Midlands, which includes Birmingham, is the first test. As England's largest city outside London, Birmingham combines high urban deprivation [45] with low household car ownership [46], and the West Midlands chose franchising in May 2025, with first services due in late 2027 and completion planned for 2029 [5]. If Greater Manchester's gains transfer, they should show up there first.

The Trailblazer Devolution Deal

On the four criteria (Table 1): stated aims met, strong on process, but outcome attribution unproven, weak; opportunity cost low, since it shifts decisions rather than spending, strong; context transferable only where an authority can staff for it, weak.

The Trailblazer Devolution Deal is a deeper-devolution agreement signed in March 2023 between the UK Government and GMCA [47]. Its central mechanism is fiscal. It extended GMCA's 100% business rates retention pilot for a further ten years and, from 2025-26, replaced the patchwork of separate

departmental grants with a single multi-year integrated settlement that the authority can allocate across transport, skills, housing and regeneration at its own discretion [48, 49]. It also granted local control over non-apprenticeship adult skills functions [48]. The stated purpose was to end the fragmented, competitive, bid-by-bid funding that had characterised English devolution and to give the authority the certainty to plan over a longer horizon [48].

Judged against that purpose, the evidence is positive: the National Audit Office (NAO) records Greater Manchester converting capital funding to revenue in a way the previous grant regime did not permit [21]. This shows that the system changed as intended, not that outcomes improved.

On reporting and accountability it has not succeeded. The NAO finds the strain greater than anticipated, with Outcomes Frameworks shaped too heavily by national priorities and weighted towards output targets: DfT started with 44 indicators and settled on 21, and the 2026/27 to 2028/29 frameworks were not agreed until March 2026, too late for authorities to finalise contracts [21]. The NAO concludes that the model cannot be judged a success until the tension between central oversight and regional autonomy is resolved [21].

Replicability is the harder test. The deal is now to extend £15.9 billion to seven Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs) [21]. The question is whether devolution allows more efficient use of capital when greater autonomy also raises the workload of the authority's own staff. GMCA's hiring pattern is instructive: on an estimate from Revelio Labs, based on online profiles rather than GMCA's accounts, its workforce grew by over 40% between Q2 2023 and Q2 2026 [50], adding capacity, although not all of that growth can be attributed to the deal and headcount measures input rather than output. Many authorities may lack the means to grow in this way. The Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority, for instance, employs only 5.9 FTE staff [51] despite potentially aiming to become an MSA [52, 53, 54]. The NAO warns that newer MSAs may struggle to benefit from their settlements without building delivery capacity [21].

Settlement per FTE employee ranges from £395,000 in the Liverpool City Region to £854,000 in Greater Manchester, against an average of £608,000 (Figure 3) [12–20]. This is a useful description but not a threshold. Authorities differ in what they deliver themselves and what their councils supply; staff are counted differently, with the Liverpool figure including Merseytravel (Appendix A, Table A1); and Greater Manchester, the model under evaluation, has the highest ratio of all, so a ceiling at the average would exclude it. The current eligibility criteria require an 18-month track record and an established leader, among other conditions, but say nothing about the capacity to expand [55]. Loayza et al. (2014) find that municipal budget execution turns mainly on the adequacy of the allocation relative to local capacity, and that decentralisation should be phased alongside capacity building [56]. The defensible condition is therefore phased devolution tied to demonstrated delivery, such as capital outturn against budget, rather than a staffing ratio.

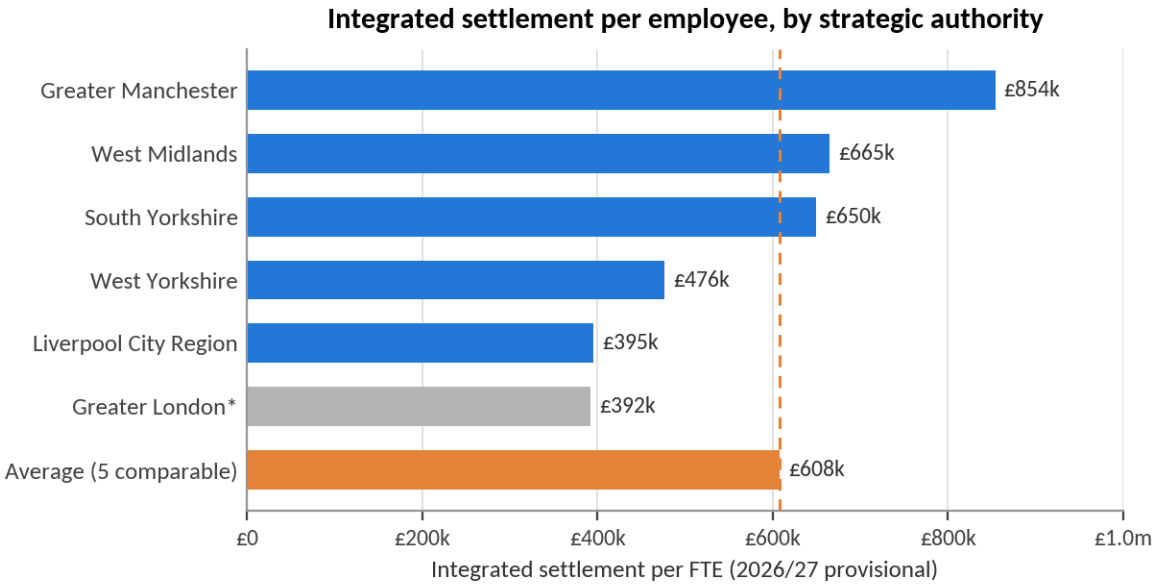


Figure 3: Provisional 2026/27 integrated settlement per FTE employee, by strategic authority. Greater London is not comparable (its settlement excludes transport and its FTE excludes TfL); the North East is omitted for want of FTE data. Staff counts and sources are listed in Appendix A, Table A1. Sources: MHCLG (provisional settlements); GLA Workforce Report, March 2025; LCRCA Accounts 2021/22; LGC analysis, 5 August 2026 [12–20].

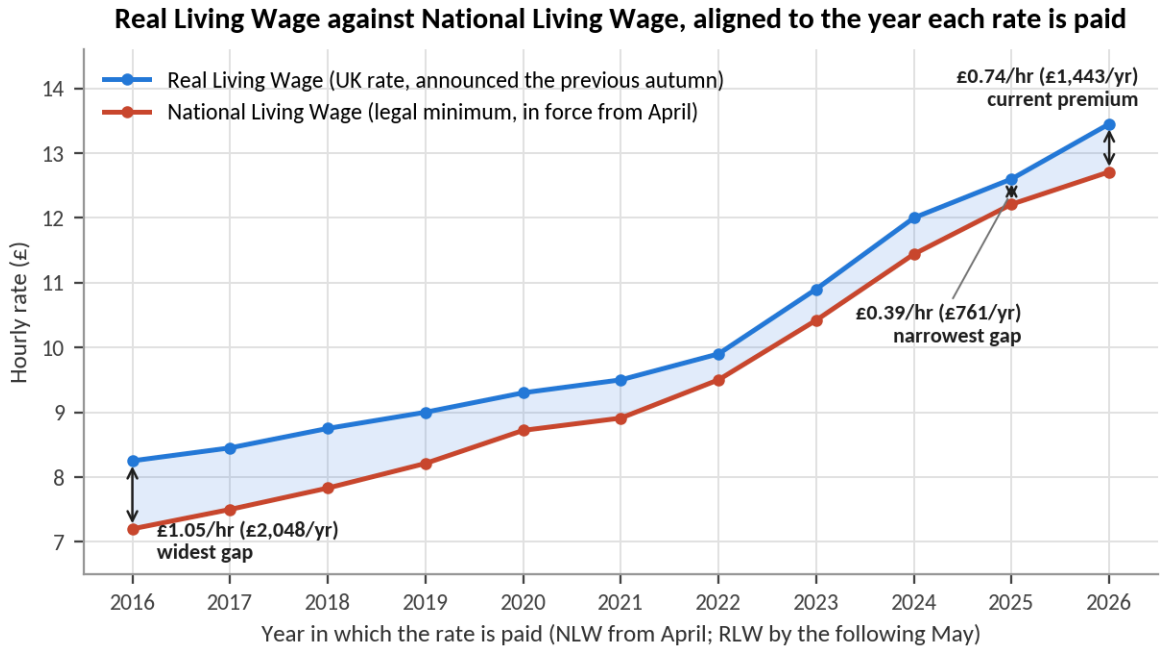
The Good Employment Charter

On the four criteria (Table 1): stated aims and attribution both hard to establish, weak; opportunity cost low, strong; context transferable, moderate, pending a trial.

The Good Employment Charter (GEC) is a voluntary membership and assessment scheme launched by the Combined Authority in July 2019 [57]. Rather than regulating, it sets a standard of good employment across characteristics such as secure work, a real living wage, flexible working, employee voice and staff wellbeing, and grades participating employers along a progression from Supporters, who commit to the aims, to assessed Members and Advocates, who must demonstrate that they meet the standard in practice [57]. By 2026 it had reached over 2,500 employers covering more than 800,000 employees [22].

In principle the Charter is a win-win. A member paying the real living wage pays a full-time worker between £761 and £2,048 more a year than the legal minimum, depending on the year (Figure 4) [24,

25], and 76% of large organisations paying it report improved retention, which lowers training costs [58]. These figures pair each real living wage rate with the legal minimum in force when accredited employers must start paying it, the following spring, and assume 1,950 hours a year; at current rates the premium is £1,443. But the premium is a firm cost too, so the win-win holds only where retention gains offset it.



Sources: Living Wage Foundation rates table (RLW, UK rate outside London); GOV.UK (NLW). Shaded gap is the premium a Charter member commits to. Annual figures assume 1,950 hours (37.5 hours for 52 weeks).

Figure 4: Real Living Wage against the National Living Wage (legal minimum), UK hourly rates, 2016–2026, paired by the year each rate is paid. The shaded gap is the premium a Charter member commits to; annual figures assume 1,950 hours a year. The National Living Wage age threshold fell to 23 in 2021 and to 21 in 2024. Sources: Living Wage Foundation; GOV.UK [24, 25].

The evidence of impact is weaker than the reach. 47% of member workplaces did not report an improvement [23], and no comparison figure for non-members is published. The 53% who did must also be read with care, since the Charter's own interim evaluation found "no clear relationship between organisation's membership status" and "reported charter improvements" [23]. That finding cuts at the grading and progression system on which the whole scheme rests: if assessed Members show no clearer improvement than firms that have merely committed, the tiers may be tracking employers' pre-existing standards rather than changing them. The known positivity bias of self-report surveys [59] applies

equally to the 76% retention figure, and raises the possibility that some reported "improvements" reflect perception or recognition of the status quo rather than material change.

The concern is sharpened by selection: firms with the worst employment records are the least likely to join, so the Charter may miss the employers who need it most.

Exact efficacy is hard to pin down, particularly given the qualitative nature of the improvements, but the Charter's low cost to government makes it low-risk. Only 3.4% of respondents from member firms said that the costs outweighed the benefits [23], though this too is self-reported. The Charter is therefore best described as low-risk but unproven: the reported improvements are consistent with it working, but equally consistent with it selecting employers who were already good.

National replication would be cheap. The Charter costs £550,000 a year to run [60]; scaled by population to the same 49 million people in England outside London, and assuming linear costs (unlikely, given economies of scale), a national scheme would cost around £9 million a year. The opportunity cost is a fraction of bus franchising. To justify long-term national replication, however, the effect should be measured properly: ideally a randomised controlled trial on firm finances, or at least a difference-in-differences design with a matched control group. Some of the Charter's objective criteria are known to pay off for firms. Bloom et al. (2013) found that introducing improved management practices raised productivity by 17% in the first year in Indian textile firms [61], and Bloom et al. (2015) found that allowing remote work improved output by 13% at a Chinese call centre [62], although the latter is confined to workers with measurable individual output and tasks that can be done remotely. Both are transfers of the kind discounted above: they show that the mechanisms exist, not that the magnitudes carry. Replication would therefore carry little fiscal risk, but that is a weaker claim than a positive case for it, and it argues for a trial rather than a national scheme.

DISCUSSION

Transfer Beyond England

Although the three policies rest on English statute, the devolved nations offer useful tests. Northern Ireland never deregulated its buses, which are run by the public corporation Translink, so it has no franchising reform to compare. Wales does. The Bus Services (Wales) Act 2026 received Royal Assent on 2 February 2026 and replaces the system created by the Transport Act 1985 [6, 63]. Franchising starts in South West Wales in 2027 and reaches Mid Wales, one of the least dense parts of Britain, in 2030 [64], so the Welsh rollout will show whether returns fall with density, as this paper expects. In Scotland, Strathclyde Partnership for Transport has approved work towards franchising and estimates the extra subsidy at £45 million to £85 million a year [65, 66], an independent estimate of what a second British conurbation expects to pay.

Manchester-ism and Neo-liberalism

Burnham's claim can only be tested against a definition. Harvey (2005) defines neo-liberalism as the view that welfare is best advanced by freeing markets within a framework of strong property rights, with the state limited to securing that framework [67]. Peck and Tickell (2002) distinguish a "roll-back" phase, in which the state withdraws from provision and regulation, from a "roll-out" phase, in which it builds new institutions to manage the markets that result [68]. The Transport Act 1985 was roll-back. The three policies examined here look more like roll-out: each changes who designs a market and who answers for it, rather than removing the market.

CONCLUSION

Across the three policies the evidence does not support a single verdict. Table 2 summarises the grades. On the four criteria, the Bee Network has the strongest results, the highest cost and contested attribution; devolution is more efficient in principle but conditional on capability, and fails on transfer rather than on effectiveness; and the Charter, cheap to run, has the weakest attribution and little quantitative evidence of success.

Table 2: Grades on the four criteria, using the rubric in Table 1.

Policy	Aims met	Attribution	Opportunity cost	Transferability
Bee Network	Strong	Moderate	Moderate (highest cost)	Moderate (dense regions)
Trailblazer Deal	Strong (process)	Weak (no outcomes yet)	Strong (low)	Weak (capacity-dependent)
Good Employment Charter	Weak	Weak	Strong (low)	Moderate (untested)

The productivity growth noted in the introduction cannot be credited to any of them. Only the Bee Network offers a plausible route to productivity, through agglomeration, and franchising was rolled out between September 2023 and January 2025, after the period the data cover; the Charter and the Trailblazer deal are smaller in scale, and the deal is more recent still. Replication must therefore be selective: the Bee Network to dense city regions, where the West Midlands and Wales will provide the first evidence from 2027, devolution to authorities that can staff for it, the Charter with a trial built in.

Nor is this the end of neo-liberalism, at least in Harvey's sense. Franchising contracts a market rather than nationalising it; the Charter asks firms to volunteer rather than legislating; devolution moves where

decisions are taken, not how much is spent. In Peck and Tickell's terms this is roll-out, not a reversal. Manchester-ism corrects deregulation rather than replacing it.

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APPENDIX A. CALCULATIONS AND STAFF COUNTS

Ridership (Figure 2): journeys equal vehicle-kilometres multiplied by boardings per vehicle-kilometre, so 1.075 × 1.111 = 1.194, a 19.3% rise allowing for rounding [9]. Cost: £227 million [33] less £45 million (the £31.8 million spent on supported services in 2014/15, in 2025 prices [35]) gives £182 million a year, about £63 for each of Greater Manchester's 2.9 million residents; multiplied by 9.5 million residents in the other five metropolitan authorities this is about £0.6 billion, and by 49 million in England outside London about £3.1 billion. Wages (Figure 4): each real living wage rate is paired with the National Living Wage in force when accredited employers must pay it, and the hourly gap is multiplied by 1,950 hours (37.5 hours for 52 weeks).

Table A1: Staff counts behind Figure 3.

Authority	Settlement 2026/27 (£m) [20]	FTE	Settlement per FTE (2026/27, provisional)	FTE source	Transport executive included?
Greater Manchester	640.7	750	£854,000	LGC analysis [12]	Not stated
West Midlands	659.8	992	£665,000	WMCA accounts 2024/25 and 2023/24 [17, 18]	Not stated
South Yorkshire	278.9	429	£650,000	LGC analysis [12]	Not stated
West Yorkshire	468.3	984	£476,000	LGC analysis [12]	Not stated
Liverpool City Region	352.5	892	£395,000	LCRCA Statement of Accounts 2021/22 [15, 16]	Yes (Merseytravel)
Greater London (not comparable)	581.2	1,483	£392,000	GLA Workforce Report, March 2025 [13, 14]	No (TfL excluded; settlement excludes transport)