

PRESENTATION TO THE WELSH ASSEMBLY

ON BEHALF OF THE CONFEDERATION OF PASSENGER TRANSPORT

POLICY REVIEW OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT IN WALES

THE WELSH ASSEMBLY

I am pleased on behalf of The Confederation of Passenger Transport in Wales to present this paper.

The Confederation of Passenger Transport represents operators of public service vehicles both large and small in the Principality and from all parts of the Principality. The Confederation of Passenger Transport is the trade association for bus, coach, light rail and metro operators. CPT gives passenger transport operators a voice through lobbying and media liaison. It also provides a forum to share information nationally and regionally and delivers a number of quality services to its members.

The bus and coach industry is vital to the Welsh economy providing 80% of the passenger movements in Wales with local services, express coach and tourist coach all playing a vital role serving many communities in all parts of the country.

There are a number of particular issues discussed in this paper. Comment will be made in terms of rural and urban operation, some of the economic factors which are key to the industry, the organisation of public transport planning within Local Authorities and concessionary fares.

Rural Areas

The availability of the Rural Bus Grant has been welcomed and has certainly led to an increased number of bus operations. Questions are raised as to the effective use of the RBG money, have old networks simply been reintroduced or has real innovation taken place? It is felt that the current regulations regarding registration of services along fixed routes may not be the most effective way of serving rural areas. The announcement by the Deputy Prime Minister of the introduction of flexible routing in respect of England is noted and suggested for Wales.

Rural areas suffer from congestion as much as urban areas do, particularly given the high level of car use in the rural parts of Wales. From a reliability point of view, a badly parked car in a countryside can quite easily create more delays than in a town. Closely aligned to this point is that bus stops are frequently the only part of the roadway in which cars can park safely. This they frequently do negating much investment, particularly by the Arriva Group in North Wales, in low floor vehicles which are unable to get close to the pavement and therefore are of little use to the elderly or disabled.

The extension of rural bus grants for use in small urban areas of Wales is welcomed. CPT would encourage a widespread review of the effectiveness of public expenditure in rural areas and encourage innovation. Interface between community and public transport would be encouraged.

Urban Areas

Very high levels of unpredictable traffic congestion now exist with a great deal of illegal parking for loading and unloading of vehicles, use of bank cash machines etc. A much greater attention to bus priorities is needed if a effective and efficient local bus network is to be maintained. As yet there seems to be no comprehensive policy from the Assembly on the upgrading of rundown bus infrastructure and the movement of buses out of heavy traffic congestion. These points are becoming critical in terms of reliability and costs particularly as extra peak vehicles are now committed regularly to service to combat the effects of traffic congestion on timetables.

The enforcement by the Traffic Commissioner of a 95% reliability within a 5 minute time band has meant that the frequency of services is now being reduced as operators struggle to maintain the standards required on road space over which they have no control..

Park & Ride in key urban areas should be encouraged combining with a high level of on street bus priority to reduce the road space available for the private car. Operators are introducing new networks of high frequency services to replace a multitude of complex routes which currently exist but these will only succeed given sufficient road space for the bus to travel on.

Economic Factors

The economics of bus and coach operation are becoming critical in many instances. The rapid rise of fuel prices combined with increasing employment costs and the implication of social legislation has meant that the margins of the industry have been squeezed hard in the past 12 to 24 months. Some Authorities are failing to give proper annual price reviews that take full account of the cost increases incurred by operators.

A continuance of this situation will only lead to disinvestment and ever ageing bus fleet and even greater levels of staff shortage than those already being encountered in the most prosperous urban parts of Wales.

Bus and Coach operators cannot be expected to absorb all costs if an adequate urban and rural public transport service is envisaged, positive discrimination for public transport is required in fiscal policy.

CPT would encourage the Assembly to campaign for an increase to 100% the level of tax relief given to bus passengers. Currently passengers by air and by rail enjoy 100% relief from any form of tax on fuel whereas bus passengers pay 25% duty. School contracts receive no form of rebate and neither does the vital express coach service sector which gives an economic and highly versatile form of transport for many parts of Wales.

The private hire coach business is vital to many sectors of the Welsh economy. For example, transport to many tourist and historic sites in Wales is provided solely by motor coach and many educational visits depend upon this form of transport. Incoming visitors rely upon coach companies to provide transport. Giving fuel duty rebate would enhance the sector and increase the quality of visitor experience.

It is also suggested that the Assembly could give leadership in examining alternative fuels for PSV vehicles, for example, liquid Petroleum Gas. Innovation would be key to reducing dependency on fossil fuels.

Local Authority Organisation

CPT would encourage a change in the current planning regime for public transport. The structure of the 22 Unitary Authorities dealing with transport is unwieldy given the regional nature of transportation. The development of regional amalgams, SWITCH, SWIFT and TIGER, is welcomed and would be supported in North Wales where it is suggested that one body could represent the six small Local Authorities which often have their own conflicting priorities and interests.

Regional structures need to be properly supported with their own staff and ultimately have their own transportation powers delivered from the Unitary Authorities. It has already been mentioned that bus operations account for 80% of passenger movements in Wales yet the Assembly and Unitary Authorities continue to invest extensively in road and rail depriving bus operators of funding for both operations and infrastructure improvements.

There needs to be a rigorous procedure for economic evaluation of all transportation proposals and options in the Assembly and Unitary Authorities policies in line with Central Government recommendations.

Currently many projects are perceived to be proceeding without such evaluations and this may have serious ongoing consequences. For example, the Vale of Glamorgan railway, where it is noted that 59% of passengers are predicted to come from parallel bus services which will only result in those services being withdrawn. Integration between modes and between Council areas is required to give the best overall transport solution.

The expenditure of £750,000 on providing one daily rail link between North and South Wales can be contrasted with an equivalent amount of money spent on high quality, express coach services which would have provided an hourly link between North and South Wales.

Concessionary Fares

The introduction of free fares for OAPs and the disabled in April 2002 must be done at reimbursement levels which are correct to ensure that the true cost of operators are reflected. Not to do so will only result in further decline and disinvestment in the network.

Conclusion

This paper has been presented on behalf of an industry providing 80% of the passenger movements in Wales. An industry providing local bus, school, express coach and tourist coach operations.

The need for enhanced priorities over other road users has been stressed in addition to relief from fuel tax to match other public transport services and encourage investment.

CPT Wales welcomes the formation of Regional Public Transport Planning Groups and seeks enhancement of their powers. The economic impact of free fares for certain community sectors must be carefully examined.

Five minutes is but an extremely short time to try and touch upon the major role played by the bus and coach industry in Wales. I would be pleased to engage in discussion and answer any questions that Members would have in order to expand on the paper.

JWD JD

19/01/01

Welsh Assembly

Policy Review