

Ken Skates MS
Minister for Economy, Transport and North Wales

23 June 2020

Dear Ken,

On 18 June the Committee took evidence from transport union representatives, Cardiff Airport and bus operators to explore the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on public transport. The Committee would like to seek clarity on a number of areas following this meeting.

Recovery phase and bus funding

Nigel Winter of Stagecoach South Wales told the Committee he was concerned about further support bus companies would receive coming through the pandemic, and how bus companies will operate as Wales transitions out of lockdown. Mr Winter stated that “we have nothing ready in place to go to the next phase ... where services need to ramp” for non-essential shops opening, schools going back and the relaxation of stay local regulations.

Mr Winter also stated that “with less than two weeks to go, we do not have a funding arrangement that's credible” and that “some clarity pretty quickly” is essential.

The Committee believes clarity for bus operators should be a priority and the Welsh Government should:

- confirm future funding arrangements, including funding levels along with details of any obligations imposed on operators, both to the operators themselves and to the Committee as soon as possible.



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Face Coverings

Both the union representatives and bus operators supported a move to mandatory face coverings on public transport. As face coverings are now required in both England and Scotland, both believed this creates uncertainty and a lack of clarity in Wales. This was seen as a particular issue for cross border rail and bus services. Witnesses emphasised the importance of having clear public communication and messaging as much as the public health concerns.

In light of this evidence the Committee believes clear messaging on Welsh public transport is essential. The Committee would be grateful if you could provide:

- Your assessment of the implications of the differing positions on face coverings in Wales and England and how the different approaches can be managed by operators and their staff on cross-border services; and
- Further detail on the rationale for the Welsh Government's position on use of face coverings on public transport in light of the evidence and the fact that these are now required on public transport in Scotland as well as England.

Taxis and private hire

The Committee discussed the issues taxi and private hire drivers are facing as a result of the pandemic. As you will know drivers' income has been particularly hard hit by the lock down. Driver safety was also a major concern given limited scope for them to socially distance. A high proportion of drivers in Wales' urban centres are from BAME backgrounds which makes this issue even more concerning given evidence suggesting these communities are at greater risk from COVID-19.

The Committee heard evidence suggesting there are benefits if protective screens are installed in vehicles. However we heard that these screens are very expensive for drivers on low incomes. Members also understand that installing screens requires approval from local authorities and that drivers who install screens may have to change their licence registration.



The Committee believes the Welsh Government need to act on safety for taxi and private hire drivers and passengers swiftly. As part of this the Committee would be grateful if you could:

- Outline the Welsh Government’s policy on the fitting of screens in taxis and private hire vehicles;
- Indicate whether the Welsh Government is able to offer financial assistance or advice for operators who wish to fit screens;
- Indicate whether there is scope within the law to temporarily amend taxi / PHV licensing requirements in the light of the pandemic. Specifically, has the Welsh Government considered temporarily amending the licensing regulations in relation to protective screens?

Cardiff Airport

The Committee took evidence from Cardiff Airport about the difficulties and challenges they have faced as a result of the huge reduction in air travel caused by the pandemic. Members heard that the Welsh Government loan, previously arranged to fund airport improvement, was now being used by the airport to help them ‘weather the storm’.

As a result of the need to redirect the loan funds, the airport’s Chief Executive Deb Bowen Rees explained that two projects planned to ensure the Airport complies with UK Government regulation had been put on hold. The airport was unclear on how at least one of these projects could be funded in future.

In February 2020, Welsh Government’s Andrew Slade set out the details of the Welsh Government’s loans to the Airport in a letter the Public Accounts Committee. As part of this he noted that £6.8m of the money requested would be “subject to approval, with supporting additional analysis and financial due diligence.” When asked about that element of the loan on 18 June, Spencer Birns of Cardiff Airport noted that he couldn’t speak for the Welsh Government on what they may or may not approve.

The Committee understands the Airport is facing unprecedented challenges and as a result will need to change its financial planning. The Committee is also aware



that the regulatory changes which require the investments discussed above have been deferred. However, the Committee is concerned about the long term impact of the deferral of the projects, and how they will ultimately be funded. The Committee would also like clarification on the elements of the loan discussed above.

In its report “Impact of COVID-19: Summary of initial findings” the Committee recommended that the Government “provide an update to the Committee on the re-profiling of the loan to Cardiff airport, including which of the improvements it was originally earmarked to fund will be put on hold and how it will be used instead, as well as whether any other short-term funding is likely to be needed to support the airport.” When responding to this recommendation the Committee would like the government to set out:

- The Welsh Government’s view on how Cardiff Airport will fulfil its future regulatory obligations such as “next generation security checkpoint.”
- The status of the £6.8 million and whether / when it will be approved.

Confidence in public transport and a shift to car travel

Members heard there was concern that the pandemic could do long term damage to people’s confidence in public transport and the result would be an increase to private car usage. Mick Lynch stated “what we fear is that there will be a big return to car travel”.

If people don’t return to public transport this would have a substantial negative effect on air quality, our carbon footprint and congestion, as well as threatening the viability of the public transport network. Alongside the matters raised above such as face coverings and taxi screens the Committee would like to know the Welsh Government’s plans to:

- Restore confidence in public transport;
- Counter the risk of increased car use; and
- Encourage modal shift away from cars in light of the pandemic.



Holyhead

Mick Lynch of RMT raised concerns that redundancies by one of the operators of ferries from Holyhead were “threatening the very future of ferry services to Ireland”. We have discussed support for Holyhead in the past however the Committee would like:

- Your view on the redundancy risk and support for Holyhead and the ferry routes in light of Mr Lynch’s comments.

Kind Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Russell", with a stylized flourish underneath.

Russell George MS

Chair

Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee

