

Senedd Cymru
Pwyllgor yr Economi, Seilwaith a Sgiliau

Effeithiau COVID-19: Galwad Agored am
dystiolaeth a phrofiadau
EIS(5) COV - 16
Ymateb gan: Cymdeithas Cludiant
Cymunedol

Welsh Parliament
Economy, Infrastructure and Skills
Committee

Impacts of COVID-19: Open Call for
evidence and experiences

Response from: Community Transport
Association

The logo for the Community Transport Association (CTA) features the lowercase letters 'cta' in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

community transport
association

CYMDEITHAS CLUDIANT CYMUNEDOL

Economy, Infrastructure and Skills committee inquiry into the impact of COVID19

A response from the Community Transport Association

This response is submitted by the Community Transport Association (CTA), a UK-wide charity working with thousands of other charities and community groups across the UK which provide local transport services that fulfil a social purpose and community benefit. We support community transport operators across Wales and work with a range of key stakeholders to champion the sector and raise standards. Community transport helps to address the quality, affordability and accessibility of transport options for people who cannot drive and do not have access to conventional public transport. It is about providing flexible and accessible community-led solutions in response to unmet local transport needs and often represents the only means of transport for many vulnerable and isolated people.

Introduction

As with other sectors, coronavirus has caused a huge shift in the way community transport services operate. Since lockdown began, we have seen a significant fall in demand for traditional community transport services such as dial-a-ride transport, group travel services, school contracts, community bus services and community car schemes.

Given that the majority of community transport drivers and passengers fall into the category of the population which is at high risk of contracting coronavirus, community transport operators were amongst the first to feel the impact of COVID19 restrictions. When the over 70's were identified as being in the 'most vulnerable' category and asked to observe the most stringent social distancing measures, many community transport services ground to a halt as operators lost their passengers, staff and volunteers overnight.

Whilst demand has fallen for health related transport, these services have been least affected and some operators have re-focused their offer to provide further support for Health Boards and Welsh Ambulance in particular in providing transport for patients accessing oncology and dialysis services.

During this time of reduced demand for passenger transport, the community transport sector has adapted its services. Community transport is often described as a 'lifeline' and this has never been more apparent than it has been during this current crisis. Our members quickly adapted to their operating environment, undertaking new activities such as 'shop & drop', prescription collection and delivery, telephone befriending and so on. In the example of Bridges Community Car Scheme in Monmouthshire, the organisation took the decision to suspend transport services and focus on telephone befriending during the lockdown period. This service has expanded to include 130 additional volunteers and 100 new service users, matching people by location to enable on-going relationships as lockdown rules are eased.

Overall, the change in approach means that the sector's critical work of reducing loneliness and isolation whilst providing an early warning system for health issues or raising the alarm in the event of a fall or such like has been able to continue.

Financial impact

Whilst Welsh Government guidance on payment of Bus Services Support Grant (BSSG), concessionary fares and school transport contracts was prompt and welcome, as with all transport operators, our members have lost all self-generated income through the loss of demand for dial-a-ride or group hire services and they have also seen a reduction in charitable donations (in some cases, appeals have helped to bolster this income stream). Although organisations are not operating their usual services (and in some cases, not operating at all), they still have fixed costs that need to be met.

To mitigate the financial impact, many organisations are drawing on their reserves; accessing the Job Retention Scheme; and submitting applications for grant-funding. However, the sustainability of these survival mechanisms are limited – reserves are finite and undercut the funds that were reserved for future needs, such as for fleet replacements and maintenance. The Job Retention Scheme is set to end in the coming months, leaving

community transport organisations to shoulder the pressure of paying staff despite a huge reduction in income which will be very difficult for organisations to bear. In terms of grant applications, the feedback from members is that forms are challenging to fill out and confusing to understand.

Unfortunately, these problems are set to persist long beyond any easing of the lockdown, given that the danger from the virus will not be eliminated for the sector's high risk workers and passengers until a vaccine is found. Moreover, owing to the ongoing need to socially distance, this will vastly reduce the capacity of community transport vehicles. Organisations are predicting that minibus capacity going forward will be at only around 30% maximum (e.g. a 16-seater minibus is likely only able to transport around 5-6 passengers safely), and the safety of car schemes is still being debated. Furthermore, the enhanced cleaning and hygiene measures that need to be in place due to COVID19 will increase the cost of service delivery.

Ensuring the financial sustainability of the sector is a major priority for us to mitigate any negative impacts in the medium to long-term. Whilst we welcome the continued grant funding support based on last years' passenger numbers, we expect that the sector will be slower to bounce back than mainstream public transport services due to the predominance of vulnerable passengers using the services. We are concerned that whilst operators have repurposed their offer to meet the needs of the present time, there may be a limit to the length of time authorities are willing to use transport budgets to fund services that are not passenger transport.

We recognise that the future public funding landscape is likely to be challenging for some years to come as a result of the additional emergency expenditure on the crisis response. This is likely to put increased pressure on public transport services, which even before COVID were often heavily subsidised or at the limits of viability. We often see community transport called upon when other transport services have failed so to allow proper planning for the future, Welsh Government should be engaging with the community transport sector and other transport partners now about the future of public transport in Wales so that proper plans can be made to ensure communities can remain connected. The Government needs to recognise that the community transport sector has a vital role to play in the recovery phase and will need to ensure the sector is supported to survive in the current environment and adapt their operations to meet the demands of the future.

Recommendation 1: Welsh Government should engage in discussions with the community transport sector and other transport partners to ensure robust plans are in place to secure a transport network fit for the future.

Recommendation 2: Welsh Government should ensure that the community transport sector is supported financially in order to secure 'lifeline' services for today and tomorrow.

Transport access

The community transport sector specialises in the provision of accessible transport solutions with a high proportion of vehicles being wheelchair accessible and services provided for those with poor mobility.

As yet, there has been no Government guidance published for transporting wheelchair users or providing passenger assistance. We are asking Welsh Government to work with us to develop official guidance for community transport operators.

Recommendation 3: The Welsh Government should ensure specialist guidance is available for operators providing transport services for vulnerable groups.

Moving forward

In terms of moving forward, we believe that community transport represents an opportunity to 'build back better' through the delivery of community-based, not-for-profit models of transport, shared ownership, and demand-responsive transport rather than returning to the previous status quo. There is also an opportunity to continue working with those people who have joined the sector as volunteers throughout this crisis and inspire them to take an active role in shaping the communities they want to live in. The opportunities enabled by community transport along with the value delivered by the sector for every pound spent should be taken into consideration when making decisions about where to allocate budgets. Since 2017, CTA's Connecting Communities in Wales project has supported the sector to lever in £2m additional funding for an investment of £300,000. The capabilities of the sector should be central to any funding decisions going forward.

Our members are expert in delivering Demand-Responsive Transport across a range of vehicles which seems like a beneficial solution to the current challenge for public transport services. Demand-responsive models require a service to be booked and therefore guarantees that the journey will take place. During this time of reduced capacity for public transport as a whole, community transport operators are well positioned to serve a new audience as people begin to return to work and school.

Recommendation 4: Welsh Government should ensure that all existing demand-responsive transport services are maximised to extend current capacity across the transport network.

Recommendation 5: The Welsh Government's community transport strategy should be updated to ensure capacity in the sector is fully utilised and organisations supported to grow in order to provide flexible, demand-responsive, not-for-profit transport solutions that benefit the people of Wales.

Health & education

Community transport offers services for thousands of users across the UK who have no other means of accessing transport and ensures individuals can travel to health services. By enabling passengers to access and benefit from medical care in a timely manner, this prevents the worsening of ill health, and lengthens the time that people can stay healthy and active in their own homes before needing to rely on the social care sector. It also reduces the demand for domiciliary care services as community transport provides a safe and accessible option for people to attend appointments rather than requiring home visits and reduces missed appointments.

One initiative which has been set up recently is the 'Car y Lan' Rural Conwy Community Car Scheme, developed with support from our Connecting Communities in Wales (CCiW) project in response to a need identified by a cluster of GP surgeries in Conwy. The number of primary and secondary care appointments being missed (known by GP's as 'Did Not Attend' (DNA) appointments) was such that the Practice Managers in the cluster approached Community and Voluntary Support Conwy (CVSC) to explore the potential to develop a new scheme to help patients to better access their appointments. Working with the CCiW project, CVSC were able to identify funding and submit proposals which secured a total of £150,000. The scheme now has a vehicle and employs a transport coordinator who arranges journeys for patients attending medical appointments.

Although there is no published data on primary care appointments, in developing the project CVSC found that some 52,800 secondary care appointments with Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board were missed by patients from Conwy West in 2015-16, at an estimated cost of £9.56m. The Practice Managers estimate that over 10% of these appointments were missed because of a lack of accessible transport options in the area. Additional mobility needs and a lack of public transport mean that residents are highly reliant on family, friends and neighbors' to get to appointments. In practice, this means that

often people are making choices about what to ask for help with, potentially sacrificing their mental health by giving up visiting friends to attend regular hospital appointments.

On top of this, many people rely on community transport, particularly in rural areas, to access education and work, either through scheduled bus services that run to fit the school day or to fit early or late shifts, or through Wheels to Work schemes. This has an impact on mental health and well-being in supporting individuals to access work and secure an income.

The contribution made by the community transport sector in supporting individuals to access health services is significant and this added value should be taken into consideration when making funding decisions.

The announcement made by the Minister for Education recently about the re-opening of schools and the subsequent shock of the bus industry highlights the need for more effective cross-departmental working. From the perspective of the community transport sector, funding accessed through transport budgets secures operations which are then able to deliver schools transport and transport for health services. We envisage that there may come a time when transport departments are unwilling to provide funding for operators to deliver services that are not passenger transport. If this happens, it will have an impact on the range of services provided by the sector and before making these decisions, the Welsh Government should work with other Departments to ensure the full impact is understood and action taken to mitigate where possible.

Recommendation 6: The Welsh Government should ensure effective cross-departmental working to ensure the full value of community transport is considered when making budget decisions.
