

Enterprise and Business Committee
IPT24.

Inquiry into Integrated Public Transport

Evidence from Guide Dogs for the Blind
Association, Guide Dogs Cymru

The Enterprise and Business Committee Enquiry into Integrated Public Transport in Wales

Response from: **e Guide Dogs for the Blind Association
Dogs Cymru**

Guide

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1. Introduction

The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association (Guide Dogs Cymru) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation, and would be pleased to give oral evidence to the Committee.

Guide Dogs vision is for a society in which blind and partially sighted people enjoy the same freedom of movement as everyone else. Our purpose is to deliver the guide dog service and other mobility services, as well as breaking down barriers - both physical and legal - to enable blind and partially sighted people to get around on their own.

The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB Cymru)

RNIB Cymru endorses this enquiry response by the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association.

RNIB Cymru is a member led organisation, which works for people with sight problems in Wales. RNIB Cymru have around 750 members in Wales who are blind, partially sighted, or friends and family of people with sight problems. We seek their views on a range of topics and reflect their challenges and concerns in this response.

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Vision in Wales (Formerly Wales Council for the Blind, WCB)

VIW endorses this Enquiry Response by The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association. VIW is a membership organisation representing the views and interests of the larger societies of blind and partially sighted people, 34 member groups and the smaller clubs, which work on a local level.

Travel is cited again and again as the main barrier to inclusion and participation, and Guide Dogs have worked with partners to produce a detailed and accurate response to the enquiry, which we fully support.

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The Wales Vision Strategy

The work of Guide Dogs, RNIB Cymru and VIW is underpinned by the Wales Vision Strategy Implementation Plan (2010.) This details a range of key; deliverable aims, which will help, improve the lives of blind and partially sighted people living in Wales.

Endorsement of the response from Guide Dogs by RNIB Cymru and WCB reflects our shared commitment to achieving equality of access to transport for all blind and partially sighted people in Wales.

About this response

This response focuses on the main issues of concern to blind and partially sighted people regarding integrated bus and rail transport in Wales. Some blind and partially sighted people do use Community Transport where public transport is limited, and for many older people in rural areas it is an essential service. It is our belief that Community Transport is a valuable asset in Wales and we recognise the contribution it makes to alleviate isolation.

The terms of reference for the inquiry are:

- How well is Welsh public transport integrated, particularly in relation to bus, rail and community transport services, and what factors limit integration?
- How successful are legal, policy and administrative / delivery arrangements in Wales in supporting effective, integrated public transport services that meet the needs of Welsh travellers?
- What steps can be taken to improve public transport integration in Wales?

Key issues

- Issues that the Committee may wish to consider as part of these terms of reference include:
- How can the integration of rail, bus and community transport services in Wales be supported and improved to meet the needs of communities and businesses in both rural and urban Wales?

2. Our Response

There are 115,000 people with sight problems in Wales ranging from those with refractive error (and whose vision could be improved by eye care professionals) to those with a permanent sight loss, which is so severe that they are eligible to register as blind or partially sighted. In Wales, 47% of them live alone, and away from the main centres of population, isolation and social exclusion become even more pronounced. The demographics are especially relevant in any discussion about public transport as the population of Wales is projected to increase by 3% over the next twenty years, and there will be nearly 650,000 people of retirement age or over by 2021.

(Independence and well being in sight: Investing in the potential of blind and partially sighted adults in Wales. The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association, 2007)

As there is a direct correlation between age and sight loss (90% of the visually impaired population are over 65) it is obvious that the need for an accessible, effective and integrated transport system is becoming even more critical. In terms of a particular issue for this group, there is a fundamental point to be made at the outset: blind and partially sighted people are often totally dependent on public transport. Without access to a car, they rely on public transport for almost every journey, and are directly affected by decisions made at a strategic level as well as the implementation of local authority policies and other factors beyond their control.

Below we have included an extract from an RNIB report published in 2012.

Saving sight and saving money: the cost and impact of sight loss in Wales

“For many people, loss of sight results in increased dependence on others. In a survey of blind and partially sighted people conducted by RNIB, 60 per cent of respondents stated that they needed help to get out of the house because of their sight loss (17). 75 per cent said that they needed help to go shopping, and 45 per cent said they needed help to manage their money.

Many blind and partially sighted people are reliant on friends and family for care and support. For others, loss of sight may result in a move into residential care. Either way, this loss of independence will have a significant practical, emotional and financial impact on both the individual and those closest to them.

Nearly half of blind and partially sighted people report feeling 'moderately' or 'completely' cut off from people and things around them (18), with 43 per cent saying that they would like to leave their homes more often (19). This sense of isolation inevitably has an impact on people's mental and emotional wellbeing.

Research suggests that around 35 per cent of older people with sight loss are also living with some form of depression (20) and that older people with sight loss who live alone are three times more likely to experience depression as those with normal sight. Sight loss has also been identified as one of the top three causes of suicide amongst older people.

Whilst the impact of sight loss can contribute to a person's mental ill health, mental ill health is similarly known to have a negative impact on a person's physical health, ability to find or keep a job, to maintain their social relationships etc. It can, therefore, become a vicious circle, with a spiralling negative impact on the individual as well as significant costs to wider society.

"Based on the number of people living with sight loss, the indirect cost of sight loss in Wales is likely to be about £250 million (8). With sight loss expected to double over the next 25 years (9) we can expect these costs to increase significantly in the near future."

3.1 We have included this information to explain why access to an integrated public transport system is so important for those who have no alternative. The factors, which influence how usable it is, are similar for many vulnerable pedestrians, and we give examples of these below:

Access to bus stops and rail stations: Ideally, blind and partially sighted people need safe access to bus stops and rail station entrances. This can often be adversely affected by cars parked inappropriately, cycles chained to lampposts, (or cycle stands which present a tripping hazard), and a lack of a safe place to cross a busy road. Such hazards also impact on people with learning difficulties; parents with push chairs and children.

Although there are many established bus stops and rail stations where changes cannot be made, good lighting and controlled road crossings may be part of a local regeneration scheme, along with parking enforcement to prevent cars and taxis from obstructing the foot way.

Good practice examples do exist, such as in Swansea, where the redevelopment of the railway station has been accompanied by a commitment from the local authority to create a guidance pathway from the entrance to the FTR Metro bus stop. This makes crossing the intervening open space easier, and acts as a visual clue for visitors. Guide Dogs Cymru and the local Access Group worked closely with Arriva Trains Wales, the Welsh Government Rail team and the local authority to achieve a fully integrated and accessible local transport hub and there is progress towards a blueprint to use on other stations benefiting from National Station Improvement Plan (NSIP) funding.

Sadly, this level of engagement with disabled people is not common, regeneration schemes do not consistently take the opportunity to promote pedestrian access to transport hubs, or even to bus stops. The lack of safe road crossings and less than obvious adjacent routes to bus stops discourages vulnerable pedestrians from treating public transport as a viable option. Who would choose to cross a busy road and stand in the rain at a poorly lit bus stop if they can travel safely and comfortably in their own car?

Blind and partially sighted people often resort to taxis to bridge the gap and avoid dangerous situations, which eats into their income and restricts their social mobility.

Below is a quotation from the Rehabilitation Officer who works with blind and partially sighted people in Newport:

"Pengam railway station in Glan-yr-Nant has a busy crossroads with no pedestrian crossing over the main Bargoed to Ystrad Mynach road or the road leading to Fleur-de-Lys. Newport railway station has a set of three separate pedestrian crossings opposite the entrance, but the last two crossings appear to work as one to a visually impaired person and there have been a number of instances where the lights have changed when people are half way across the second part of the crossing. I have a couple of client's that are using taxis to get to the railway station to avoid crossing this road. Obviously this adds to the cost of travelling. Newport bus station is inaccessible for people with a vision impairment need I add more?"

We close this section with a quote from a Guide Dog owner who works and lives in St Melons and travels independently:

"The number 44 and 45 buses from St. Mellons to Cardiff City Centre no longer stop at Cardiff bus station which is opposite Cardiff Central railway station. What this means is that instead of being able to exit the bus station and head straight for the railway station I now have to fight through some busy areas of the city centre to complete my journey. The result of this is that I now get off the bus further away from the railway station so I can pick my own route to the train station. So I can choose a route, which is easier for the dog and has a lot less human traffic to manage. If I get a bus to Newport from Cardiff (usually the number 30 from St. Mellons) it does not stop at Newport railway station. I either have to walk from Newport bus station, which is a bit tricky, or negotiate the bus station and try and find a bus that does stop at the railway station. It might be easier for local people, but as an occasional visitor it does put me off doing it."

3.2 Information

The other major deterrent to blind and partially sighted people using public transport is lack of accessible accurate and timely information. This was picked up in the Public Transport Users Committee (PTUC) report, Provision of Public Transport Information in Wales, Published in April 2012.

"Disabled people are not a homogeneous group. Clearly public Transport users who are disabled have particular requirements in respect of the provision of public transport information and these needs will vary. The Public Transport Users Committee received evidence in particular in respect of hearing and visual loss. A range of communication methods needs to be used to meet disabled people's needs. Audio and visual announcements are particularly beneficial to certain disabled people. Where audio and visual announcement systems are available they are not always activated. How, where and in what format information is provided does not currently consistently take disabled people's needs into account."

The report goes on to say;

"Bus drivers are a key point of information provision during journeys and at stops. Drivers' attitudes and role in providing effective and timely information is critical. Consistent customer care training including a demonstrable understanding of equality and diversity, and practical guidance on disability awareness should be included in this training. Although information provision is not related in an immediately visible way to integration of transport modes, it is a crucial factor influencing how confident people feel about using it."

Mr C, of Llandudno, who shared this concern with us, travels miles on public transport every month.

“Llandudno junction station is busy, it's where a lot of the main lines come in, but the audio announcements are terrible! I stand there with my dog trying to hear what is being said but most of the time I have to shout to a passer by just to make sure I'm in the right place!

I think bus drivers are paid not to be helpful to passengers, if I ask them to tell me what number bus it is, they ask me where I want to go. Even if I tell them I can never rely on them to make sure I get off in the right place, it's always hit and miss!”

Currently, only one company, Newport Transport, has committed to purchasing all its new vehicles with on board audio announcements.

In Swansea, the FTR Metro service delivered by First Cymru has the capacity for on board audio announcements but they are not consistently activated. Guide Dogs Cymru along with SAFE (Swansea Access for everyone) and Swansea Disability Forum, has been campaigning for more than three years to get the announcements on permanently and although we have the council's support and that of Assembly Members, it continues to be unreliable.

4. How successful are Regional Transport Consortia in supporting the provision of effective, integrated public transport?

Response

It is our view that the regional Consortia model leads to gaps in provision and an inconsistent approach to equality of access to transport. Blind and partially sighted people are hugely disadvantaged by living in rural areas and are at the mercy of bus operators and fluctuations in local transport grants. This would seem to be at odds with the overarching themes in

One Wales: Connecting the Nation

“The way in which transport is developed should take into account the different needs of a diverse range of users and enable greater social inclusion through improved accessibility. Many individuals, communities and groups are disadvantaged by the current system.

Connecting the nation sets out the high-level, long-term outcomes that will address access and accessibility issues.

The barriers to access experienced by different individuals are due to a complex interaction of different factors, emphasising the importance of engaging users during the development/planning process.

Engagement with different groups during the development of **Connecting the nation** has highlighted a series of common, high-level issues:

- The importance of continued engagement with the wider community
- The issues around the comparative costs of different modes of travel
- The need for joined-up service provision that reflects the needs of users
- The need to improve actual and perceived safety and security of the transport system
- The importance of getting street design right

We would also draw attention to the legal requirement for Equality Impact Assessment. It is not clear as to whether the Consortia conduct an EIA on local schemes, but as the lead organisation in Wales delivering mobility training to blind and partially sighted people we have not been involved in any impact assessments and nor has our input been sought regarding any proposed transport schemes.

5 How effectively does Welsh Government policy support public transport integration?

In particular, the Welsh Government is considering the establishment of Joint Transport Authorities in Wales, and the feasibility of operating the Wales and Borders rail franchise on a not-for-dividend basis. Additionally, the Minister for Local Government and Communities has indicated that he is considering the use of quality partnerships and contracts in delivery of bus services. How far would these proposals improve integrated public transport provision in Wales?

Response

We would support the introduction of quality bus partnerships where they require operators to develop mechanisms for engagement with minority groups and robust complaints monitoring procedures.

In terms of how effective Welsh Government policy is in supporting integrated transport, we would refer the Committee to the Equality Impact Assessment on the National Transport Plan and the key issues that were brought out by the consultation responses included in that document:

"Looking at targeting measures to ensure children have better access to safe routes, so that walking and cycling become a viable and

attractive option; and also to increase the opportunities for those in poorer households to travel actively.

When striving for CO2 reductions, to consider the relative cost of public transport, which has risen faster than the cost of motoring in recent years, and also to think about the impact on the poorest households, who are least likely to have the use of a car.

With the development of better routes for cyclists, the needs of pedestrians for equal safe access are not overlooked. Believe that developing better routes for pedestrians should have equal priority, and that there should not be a presumption that they will be shared with cyclists.

Integrating local transport and improving access between key settlements and sites

- The need for bus drivers and rail staff to have Disability Equality Training
- Better acknowledgement of the economic benefits of an affordable accessible transport system that improves quality of life
- How concessionary fares are no use if there is no access to a bus service near you (this particularly true for rural areas), and looking at the other options available, such as extending these concessions to community transport.
- Improving the accessibility and availability of information. Having audible and clearly visible information on public transport, and improving travel information websites
- The difference in accessibility of services between rural and urban areas, which have an impact on many groups, most notably disabled and older people.
- Mid Wales's connectivity and transport services are particularly uncoordinated, having an impact on employment prospects for those without access to a car.

6 Increasing Safety and security

- Community transport services should be dealt with on par with rail and bus services. Important that public transport services are provided at times and frequencies that meet needs of travellers
- Concerns around the number of stations in Wales that are not staffed, and the effect this has on actual and perceived safety of public transport.
- The needs of pedestrians for equal safe access is as important as planning for cyclists, and there were several responses to this effect.

- Children and young people have identified limitations to independent travel via public transport, travel speed, the prevalence and importance placed on parked vehicles, and the volume of traffic as significant barriers
- What innovative approaches to delivery of public transport in Wales might be considered to improve integration?

Response

We have no comment to make on this question.

7 How effectively do key stakeholders, particularly transport operators and public bodies, cooperate to ensure effective service delivery?

Referring to the evidence given in section 3.1 of this document, it would seem that many of these recommendations have been overlooked.

Response

We have no comment to make on this question.

8 How can the creation of a Network Rail Wales devolved route support effective, integrated public transport in Wales?

Response

We have no response to make to this question.

9 What are the implications of the England and Wales High Level Output Specification and Statement of Funds Available for Control Period 5, published by the UK Government, for the development of integrated rail services in Wales?

Response

We have no response to make to this question.

10 What examples of good practice in public transport integration can be identified within Wales, more widely within the UK and Internationally?

Response

We have referred to the re-development of Swansea rail station and have nothing to add.

If you wish to contribute written evidence, please send an electronic copy of your submission to enterprise.committee@wales.gov.uk or post your evidence to:

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Submissions should arrive by Friday 2 November 2012.