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Petitions Committee  
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1 August 2013

Dear William

Thank you for your letter of 26<sup>th</sup> June regarding the petition from Barbara Snowball concerning bus transport in Gwynedd.

I have been very clear in my view as Older People's Commissioner that good, effective public transport is a lifeline to older people, and has a critical influence on their quality of life and overall wellbeing. This has been reinforced to me when I go out and speak with older people from right across Wales, and they consistently tell me just how important public transport can be in helping them to stay active and independent.

I strongly support the concerns on the petitioner who has contacted you, and in particular the frustration expressed at the lack of access to key community services through a lack of suitable transport.

In setting out my thoughts on this issue for your committee, I want to highlight three main areas – the evidence from relevant research, current policy challenges, and my own recommendations around transport.

### Research evidence

There is significant evidence from research which shows the importance of public transport to older people:

- Recent research from Royal Voluntary Service Cymru <sup>1</sup> highlighted that older people in Wales are increasingly left isolated by a lack of access to suitable transport:
  - More than 18,000 over-75s feel trapped in their own home through lack of suitable transport;
  - 17% of older people in Wales have been affected by a reduction

<sup>1</sup> Royal Voluntary Services Cymru (2013) *Going Nowhere Fast: impact of inaccessible public transport on wellbeing and social connectedness of older people in Wales*, Cardiff: Royal Voluntary Services Cymru.

- in public transport services;
  - 19.6% of respondents were unable to manage the walk to/from their nearest public transport;
  - 10.7% said public transport is not accessible for them;
  - 18.8% did not know what public transport services are available in their area;
  - 25.1% of those who did not use public transport to get out and about have to rely on others to do their shopping for them.
- Transport is a particular problem in rural areas (where the population is much older than is the case for urban areas<sup>2</sup> - a trend which is set to continue<sup>3</sup>), but not exclusively so. Reduced mobility and inaccessible transport infrastructure can mean that even in towns and cities, transport fails to meet older people's needs<sup>4</sup>.
  - Reliable local transport networks become increasingly significant as people get older, with journeys for essential items and social activities becoming more of a challenge<sup>5</sup>. The ability to travel contributes to prolonged independence and continued social inclusion<sup>6</sup> – so transport therefore has to be seen as an integral part of policies aimed at improving the experiences of older people.
  - Public transport is much more important to older people than to the population as a whole. Two-thirds of single pensioners have no car, and for this group the local bus or train is a lifeline<sup>7</sup>.

### Current policy challenges

- **Funding:** Recent reforms have seen the Regional Transport Services Grant (RTSG) replace the former Bus Services' Operators Grant and the Local Transport Services Grant. The new funding mechanism has resulted in an overall funding cut of 26% over the previous equivalents<sup>8</sup> – a deeper overall cut than in England and Scotland, and one which means that bus services and community transport services are being reduced. Alongside this, and very possibly related to it, statistics show<sup>9</sup> that bus travel in Wales fell by 6.9% in 2012/13 (more than twice the fall in either England or Scotland) whilst Welsh bus fares increased by 6.9% last year (more than twice the rate of inflation).

<sup>2</sup> Public Health Wales Observatory (2012) *Older People Indicators 2012*, Wales: PHWO.

<sup>3</sup> Welsh Assembly Government (2009) *Rural Health Planning – improving service delivery across Wales*, Wales: Welsh Assembly Government.

<sup>4</sup> Phillipson, C., Bernard, M., Phillips, J. & Ogg, J. (2001) *The Family and Community Life of Older People: social networks and social support in three urban areas*, London: Routledge.

<sup>5</sup> Centre for Social Justice (2011) *Age of Opportunity: transforming the lives of older people in poverty*, London: CSI.

<sup>6</sup> Age Cymru (2012) *Prevention Into Practice*, Cardiff: Age Cymru.

<sup>7</sup> Sustrans (2012) *Access Denied: transport poverty in Wales*, Cardiff: Sustrans, Age Cymru, Citizens Advice Bureau, Save The Children.

<sup>8</sup> Community Transport Association Wales (2012) *CTA Newsletter, Winter 2012/13*, Swansea: CTA Wales.

<sup>9</sup> Clark, R. (2013) *"Bus travel in Wales at its lowest since launch of free passes for over-60s and the disabled"*, WalesOnline, 21<sup>st</sup> June 2013.

- **Concessionary fares:** There is no doubt that the concessionary bus pass policy has brought major benefits to older people in Wales, and is hugely valued for its impact, as demonstrated by our own research<sup>10</sup> which showed:
  - 81% of respondents believed that without the pass, their quality of life would suffer;
  - 78% believed they would be more lonely without it;
  - 92% of respondents said that the bus pass allowed them to be independent.

Yet for all its totemic political importance, we should not allow the concessionary bus pass policy to act as a panacea for the wider problems older people face in relation to transport. All too often, older people will say that they value the bus pass, but their local bus service has been reduced or cut completely. We also have anecdotal evidence suggesting that private bus operators see routes predominantly used by concessionary bus pass holders as 'soft targets' when cuts need to be made.

- **Transport to/from hospital:** A quarter of car-less households feel that the local hospital is one of the most difficult locations to access via local bus services<sup>11</sup>. This is particularly relevant in light of proposals for NHS reorganisation in Wales: getting older people to and from hospital will become an even greater logistical challenge when there are fewer specialist hospitals, so effective transport planning is critical to NHS changes.

## Recommendations

Despite a very clear consensus from older people themselves and from relevant research, it is clear that cuts to bus services have often disproportionately affected older people – and too often, older people's voices are not heard when changes to bus services and routes are considered. This is supported by the petition which you have received and the supporting information which has been submitted by the petitioner. It seems equally clear that if we are to make Wales a good place to grow older, we have to start by ensuring older people right across the country are connected and can get to where they need to go.

I am particularly concerned by the fact that older people often feel powerless to influence decisions being taken about bus services in their area, and feel that their voices are not being heard when services are reduced, re-routed or cut entirely. I would like to see bus operators being forced to carry out an impact assessment of any changes to routes to ensure that older people are

<sup>10</sup> Older People's Commissioner for Wales (2010) *Concessionary Bus Pass Research*, Cardiff: OPCW.

<sup>11</sup> Sustrans (2012) *Access Denied: transport poverty in Wales*, Cardiff: Sustrans, Age Cymru, Citizens Advice Bureau, Save The Children.

not disproportionately affected by changes.

I also believe that access to health services is a key priority for older people, and I would like to see more being done to ensure that community transport fills the gaps left by cuts to regular public transport. Community transport is viewed<sup>12</sup> very positively, and also provides excellent value for money – with the new Strategy for Older People in Wales<sup>13</sup> suggesting that community transport is worth £3 for every £1 spent on it. It may be that by increasing the proportion of regional transport grant funding which must be spent on community transport schemes, we can prevent older people in parts of Wales (particularly rural areas) from being left stranded through lack of access to public transport.

I trust this information is of assistance, and that the Petitions Committee find it useful in guiding their discussion on this important matter.

Yours sincerely



**Sarah Rochira**  
**Older People's Commissioner for Wales**

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<sup>12</sup> Age Cymru (2010) *Key Findings of the Community Calculator*, Cardiff: Age Cymru.

<sup>13</sup> Welsh Government (2013) *Strategy for Older People in Wales 2013-2023: living longer, ageing well: making Wales a great place to grow old*, Wales: Welsh Government.