

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Menter a Busnes

National Assembly for Wales
Enterprise and Business Committee

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Gwasanaethau Bysiau a Thrafnidiaeth Gymunedol yng Nghymru	Bus and Community Transport Services in Wales
BCT 31	BCT 31
Partneriaeth Trafnidiaeth Ranbarthol ar ran Cynghorau Ceredigion, Gwynedd a Phowys	Regional Transport Partnership on behalf of Ceredigion, Gwynedd and Powys Councils

Consultation questions

Question 1 – how would you describe the current condition of the bus and community transport sectors in Wales?

Across the mid Wales region the operation of bus services is particularly challenging due to the largely rural nature of the terrain which makes it very difficult to provide a commercially viable bus service without public subsidy. This is doubly challenging with the on-going requirement to significantly reduce budgets and the need to identify saving in local authority budgets.

The ability to sustain the current levels of funding to run buses by the local authorities is probably not achievable and therefore this will inevitably lead to a further reduction in bus services. However this would apply a certain amount of conflict to the social economic and environmental wellbeing of Wales as the support to provide non-commercial services in rural areas is vital component. .

There is also a significant commercial reluctance in the bus industry to do anything to enhance the customer experience, unless the Welsh Government / Local Authorities provides additional funding where it should be argued that the bus industry should be providing these services as part of their commercial offer. There is no doubt that bus performance is variable across Wales and lacks consistency, and there is a real need to improve performance and establish greater consistency in order to address decline in bus patronage, it is also felt that the 'input driven' quality standards being proposed via the Bus Service Support Grant will not address this fundamental issue.,

The Community Transport sector continues to be identified as the sector that will 'fill in' the gaps of the commercial and withdrawn tendered network,

however as the network contracts, these gaps will become wider. The risk is that providing a public service by volunteers could overwhelm the already under pressure sector, which could lead to a steeper decline in the number of third sector transport providers in the future.

Bus passenger journeys are in decline and the standard answer is 'they will not increase unless more public funding is made available'. This is all well and good in times of plenty, however until the bus industry starts to become more reliant on fare box revenue and less on the declining public sector revenue (BSSG & Concessionary fares income) and becomes more commercially astute, the vicious circle continues and the likelihood is that passengers will continue to decline as will the number of services. The effect of this there becomes an increased reliance upon the car or community transport. In rural mid Wales we already see 20% of household that do not have access to a car and with an aging population, how access to services and opportunities is therefore a concern.

There have been a number of reviews of the funding process and the amount of funding from WG, which has in part, led to the current condition of the bus and community transport in Wales. In rural areas there will always be a significant reliance on public funding to continue to develop and improve the services. However the rural areas also have to be realistic in our expectations in that we can no longer afford to support very marginal services in the rural hinterland. Local Authorities will need to make braver decisions in applying (or not) financial support to areas where operating bus services is not effective, and to reallocate the resource to more defined corridors to enable rural towns to be connected with other rural towns and or bigger centres of employment / health and education opportunities. We recognise that this may lead to large areas that will not have access to bus services and may add pressure to community transport schemes.

Urban areas need to review the need to provide public support for evening and late night and weekend services. The difficult question to ask is if it is not financially viable, is it really required?

Question 2 – why do you think the number of bus services and the number of bus passengers is declining in Wales?

Because of the high dependency of public sector input into the industry and the lack of commercial ideas to generate patronage. It comes as no surprise that the reduction of passengers and the reduction of service and service frequency have reduced, at a similar rate to the reduction of public sector money.

There are examples across Wales where there is a co-ordinated network of buses, but these are fairly few and far between. What tends to occur is that

local networks develop which are not wholly co-ordinated across the wider region. This can potentially put people off travelling if there are perceived to be too many variables to their intended travel destination. The cost; frequency; condition of waiting facilities and ticketing /fares information all have an impact upon usage.

Question 3 – what do you think is the social, economic and environmental impact of recent changes in bus and community transport service levels?

Providing and improving rural accessibility by public transport is very challenging – small scattered and isolated communities are not conducive to financially-sustainable regular bus services and even the main towns in the Mid Wales region are relatively small despite providing the main service centres for their rural hinterland. . There is no ‘one size fits all’ solution.

Buses are only more efficient if we are able to maximise their ability to carry passengers; running empty buses is a problem in rural areas. In order to increase the modal share there needs to be a critical mass, which can only be achieved with a number of relatively simple interventions:

- Prioritisation of key strategic routes
- A wider view of service provision to compliment other political aspirations such as regeneration, education and health
- To enable social mobility and opportunity, there needs to be a more dynamic approach to what public transport is. For example, community transport does not have to be a ‘group of well-intentioned volunteers’ specifically looking after the vulnerable in a defined community. CT should be community enabled transport, and not just provided by volunteers but a wider range of operators (including taxis, community and private sector provider) and not just in the rural areas, but in urban areas too.
- Planning services with our health, education and employment colleagues (even if there are across the border) to enable access from key settlements to these centres at the appropriate times.

When bus services are withdrawn the quality of life for those who were reliant upon them are reduced. This has been outlined in the Age Concern Cymru study as an example however, it is also recognised that it also reduces the ability to access jobs; education and leisure to name but a few. Continued reduction of budgets will not enable supporting and investing in the local economy.

The focus of the health care agenda is to centralise services and therefore the need to travel longer distances is not an option. Whilst traditionally hospital transport support the needs of the patients, this is also increasing under pressure and it is assumed that public transport or community transport run by the voluntary sector will pick up any non-emergency transport. This affects everyone – patients, friends and relatives - and under the current funding levels will not fill the gaps, of providing transport for disadvantaged groups.

Less bus journeys mean more car journeys which have negative consequences on social, economic and environmental issues; however we have to be honest in Mid Wales and recognise that a car journey may be the most appropriate at this time.

Question 4 – what do you think the Welsh Government should do to support bus and community transport in Wales?

1. To use the bus industry as a consultative partner rather than have them in to discuss and agree bus policy and associated public sector spending
2. A longer term commitment (possibly spanning one government to both capital and revenue funding levels (especially if they are going to continue to reduce) to enable local authorities to better plan to provide their strategic services
3. An all Wales administration system with a standardised live KM rate for all of Wales and Concessionary fares.
4. To start the debate / consultation on the re-regulation of bus services
5. To give local authorities / regional areas a clearer direction in terms of National priorities and how the LA's can help deliver them locally.

Question 5 – what do you think Welsh local authorities should do to support bus and community transport services?

Given the difficult financial environment, it is challenging for local authorities to dramatically improve performance. However local authorities could:

1. Develop a more business-like relationship with the bus industry and one that clearly sets outcomes (based on National & local priorities) and what can be delivered commercially and/or with accurately costed public subsidy.
2. There perhaps also needs to be an acceptance by LA that funding from WG is going to change going forward and that we cannot keep

the 'post 1985' status quo in 2015 too. Local authorities should be (by having a more formal relationship with the industry) the conduit between delivering locally important outcomes via the bus industry and playing a key part in informing national policy.

There is no statutory duty for local authorities to provide public transport, but there is to provide home to school transport. There may be an opportunity to develop the community transport market to offer more sustainable revenue funding which could then assist them to deliver local services.

Question 6 – what do you think about proposals to devolve bus registration powers to Wales? How should these be used?

We would concur with the view that the current arrangements whereby the Traffic Area Office dealing with Welsh bus service registrations is based in Leeds and we share the Traffic Commissioners with the West Midlands is not sufficient and the Traffic Commissioner has recently provided his view on this. Wales should be recognised as a separate area and have sufficient resources allocated to it accordingly.

There is a greater role for Traveline Cymru. We have said at a previous enquiry that there should be a single point of public transport information in Wales and that should be Traveline. However, and for reasons that we cannot evidence at this particular time, there appears to be a significant lack of confidence in Traveline Cymru in the bus industry and local authorities.

There would need to be a wider discussion about the role of Traveline and the possible centralisation of funding BSSG and Concessionary Fares. In a devolved transport environment, a possible option would be to move Traveline under a Welsh Traffic Commissioner (along with BUUK Cymru and the Enforcement Officers) with a funding coming from the industry to support from registration fees?

Question 7 – please tell us whether you think further powers to regulate the bus industry in Wales are required and why?

It's an interesting point. There is a debate to be had to determine if we actually need to regulate the industry or be simply more effective at applying current legislation. Much of what can be delivered via a deregulated industry could almost be delivered now using existing powers. The only difficulty to this is around competition issues and of course not a particularly commercially confident market. However there is no reason why a privately owned bus company cannot exist in a regulated environment?

Whichever way the industry is governed in the future, there would need to be a more defined, almost contractual relationship between the public funders (be it WG directly or Local Authorities) that clearly state the reason why a bus

service receives public money (including concessionary fares income).

Question 8 – what other action can be taken to ensure that bus and community transport services meet the needs of people in Wales?

Whilst acknowledging the lack of political desire to amend any part of the Welsh Concessionary travel scheme, at some point there will need to be a discussion around the context of “no better no worse off”. For example, if the concessionary fare transactions had a 0 revenue implication and uplifted pence per live kilometre rate paid for example, in return for more fare paying passenger focused outcomes it may stimulate people to start using the bus and stem the decline in patronage. Similarly, when re-franchising the rail network, if it was specified that the All Wales Concessionary Travel Pass was accepted during the ‘off-peak’ hours, (and will not attract a reimbursement to the TOC but included in their tender price) the level of buses may stabilise to a less skewed position that has occurred during the exponential growth in concessionary travel?

We believe that there could better use made of the people whom we provide public transport for. If we can engage more effectively with genuine, regular passengers of bus services and put the context of public funding and consistency of bus services to them to make real tangible improvements, then we may start to engage non bus users which should start to increase patronage.

Please tell us anything else you would like to mention this topic, thank you for contributing to our inquiry.

There is clearly a role for buses and the bus service in Wales. However in austere times we need to be able to focus our resource to the most appropriate areas and not be so aspirational in our publically stated aims and objectives.