
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 45	BCT 45
Sefydliad Bevan	Bevan Foundation

Consultation questions

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

The current condition of the bus sector is mixed and the considerable variation within the sector should be recognised.

Some services have benefited from investment and offer high quality, comfortable and reliable services with facilities (e.g. wifi) that are absent from trains. Some services are experiencing considerable growth, for example Stagecoach increased the frequency of the X4 Merthyr Tydfil – Cardiff week-day daytime service to every ten minutes in January 2015.

Where there are difficulties they centre around:

a. Quality

Some services are very poor quality, using old, badly-maintained vehicles, offering low reliability, limited information and with little focus on customer service.

b. Reliability

Many bus services are affected by congestion and obstructions, whether caused by volume of traffic on peak-time commuter routes or badly-parked vehicles on housing estates.

c. Frequency

There are often issues with early morning, evening and Sunday services in urban and valleys areas, and with having any bus service at all in less populated areas.

d. Supporting infrastructure

The experience of using a bus is shaped by more than just the journey – for example the availability of information, the facilities, cleanliness and safety at bus stations and bus stops, and, to a lesser extent, interchanges with other modes of transport. While there are some excellent examples (for example Swansea bus station) the supporting infrastructure in many other places is often extremely poor.

Much of the recent focus of policy has been on issues such as through-ticketing and bus-rail interchanges. In my view these are much less important than the four issues outlined above, not least as the vast majority of passengers use the bus for local journeys and do not require inter-availability.

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

Where services have contracted the reasons are in my view two-fold:

a. **Commercial services**

Commercial services contract because they no longer generate an acceptable profit for operators. There are several reasons for this, including competition from the private car, an unattractive offer from bus operators (e.g. high fares, low quality, unsuitable destinations as outlined above), reduced compensation for concessionary fares, rising costs and changes in operators' profit expectations.

b. **Non-commercial services**

The key factor in the contraction of non-commercial services is the withdrawal of subsidies by local authorities (which in turn reflects the changes in Welsh Government funding and pressure on local authority budgets).

The contraction of services has been made worse by:

- a. Relatively weak policies aimed at encouraging and supporting the development of new bus services (as opposed to supporting demand by subsidising concessionary and youth fares and Welsh Government-run bus services).
- b. Frequent changes in Welsh Government policy and funding for non-commercial services;
- c. Differing procurement practices amongst local authorities and lack of responsiveness to local demand (as opposed to local political preferences).

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

I would reiterate that not all services are in decline. However, where bus services have contracted the impact on people dependent on them can be severe. People who use buses typically have lower incomes than those who use cars or train, and are more likely to be older or young adults, disabled and female. Unemployed people for example are very much more likely to be dependent on buses than the general workforce.

When a service is withdrawn, bus users are no longer able to travel independently. Our research for Age Cymru found that one option some older people used was to ask a friend or relative for a lift or use a taxi. However a substantial minority said that they would not make a journey at all – potentially cutting them off from essential services as well as social contact.

Many organisations working with young people report how lack of bus services limit young people's educational, employment and leisure activities. A survey of unemployed people in England (Johnson & Mackie, 2013) found that a fifth of unemployment people had not applied for a job, not attended an interview, had turned down a job or left because of the lack of a bus service – there is no reason to think Wales would be any better in this respect.

D. Johnson & Peter Mackie (2013) Buses and the Economy II Survey of Bus use amongst the Unemployed. Leeds University Institute for Transport

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

The question of what should be done has been answered many times, most recently in the report for the Welsh Government of the Bus Policy Advisory Group. The difficulty appears to be delivering the recommendations.

The reasons for this are not clear but include:

- priority given to road and rail within Welsh Government policy and implementation;
- with some notable exceptions, lack of capacity and expertise in central and local government and in academia;
- focus on support for passenger demand via concessionary fares, which has potentially skewed the market;
- a focus on regulation as the only problem / solution.

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

The potential for local authority support is considerable as set out in the Bus Policy Advisory Group report (and many others), but it is significantly hampered by very variable resource and expertise available across Wales. Some authorities have done a great deal but others have virtually no capacity. In addition, local authority boundaries do not necessarily reflect local travel patterns.

The Bus Policy Advisory Group recommended:

- network partnerships should be established comprising local authorities, bus operators and key destination managers, to maximise the potential of commercial and marginal services;
- consideration be given to locating support for bus services into an all-Wales body, which oversaw a whole range of bus-related functions,

with a strong regional element.

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

I welcome the proposals to devolve bus registration powers. For them to be used well will require a robust policy framework for bus which clearly identifies the role of bus registration and how it can be used as a tool to improve services.

This might include, for example:

1. a minimum period for operation of a new or revised service to give passengers certainty;
2. increasing the notice period before a service is changed or withdrawn;
3. requiring significant publicity to the public before a service is changed or withdrawn;
4. close monitoring of compliance;
5. a robust complaints procedure for alleged non-compliance.

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

Additional powers to regulate the bus industry have some role to play in improving services, particularly to address issues of quality and complaints. However it is **not** a panacea – and questions of congestion, competition from cars, and services for places / times when demand is low will continue to need to be addressed.

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

The practical actions are well known. What is required is a clear political commitment to better bus services, a strong delivery mechanism in central and local government, good working relationships with bus operators and modest, carefully-targeted financial support.

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

I have a long-standing interest in bus policy from my earlier career, and recently was commissioned by the Minister for Economy, Science and Transport to review the TrawsCymru services and to chair her Bus Policy Advisory Group, from which I resigned for personal reasons in spring 2015. My interest is because of the importance of buses as an equality and social justice issue.