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Y Gweinidog Newid Hinsawdd
Minister for Climate Change



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Jayne Bryant MS
Chair
Children, Young People and Education Committee

SeneddPlant@senedd.cymru

21 December 2023

Dear Jayne,

Thank you for your letter dated 21 November to the Deputy Minister for Climate Change regarding learner transport. I am responding as the Deputy Minister is unwell.

I appreciate the important work the Committee is undertaking in this area and the comments made by families, young people and the organisations who represent them. I sympathise with the concerns raised in relation to learner travel and recognise the importance of this issue for parents, children and young people.

Learner travel is a cross-cutting complex area. As Committee members are aware, the Learner Travel (Wales) Measure (LTM) is the legislative framework that underpins learner transport in Wales. A review of the LTM was published in 2022 and a further internal analysis and evaluation exercise was undertaken earlier this year. These pieces of work reflect the findings from various pieces of work from the Children, Young People & Education Committee, that the transport needs of learners are complex, as are the networks, tools and resources required to deliver effective home to school transport services.

We do, however, believe that despite these challenges, there are opportunities for innovative approaches to be implemented to improve consistency and delivery of learner travel support across Wales. These opportunities are set out in the Learner Travel Recommendations Report that will be published in January 2024. The report sets out a modest pathway to develop a safe and sustainable learner travel offer that aligns with Welsh Government policies

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

and aspirations, reflecting legislative changes that have taken place since the introduction of the LTM in 2008.

Thank you for raising the Committee's findings with me. I have addressed each of your themes in turn for ease of reference.

Evidence gathered: What are your views on the evidence we have gathered? Does this reflect your understanding of the issues across Wales, and the impact it can have on access to education and childcare?

We will be interested to read the final report of the Children, Young People and Education Committee's current review on whether disabled children and young people have equal access to education and childcare and we thank the Committee for looking into this important issue.

In the meantime, I appreciate you sharing directly with me the relevant findings on the experiences of children and young people with ALN of travelling to and from their places of learning and the impact it can have on wider family members.

Learners with ALN often face greater social barriers, not only to their learning. We therefore expect additional care to be taken for vulnerable learners accessing transport provided by local authorities, to ensure greater consistency in their safety and wellbeing.

The individual development plan (IDP) includes provision for transport needs for children and young people with ALN to be documented and is an opportunity for individuals, their families and the relevant authority to ensure that the appropriate provision is sought. Completing the travel arrangement section in IDPs, when relevant, can help with the coordination and delivery of school transport for the most vulnerable learners.

We hear of learners with ALN facing transport difficulties when accessing further education and that the provision of transport is inconsistent across Wales. As the letter suggests this can be a particular problem for those over 19 years old. Often a learner with more complex ALN will stay in school until they are around 19 years old before continuing their education at a further education college.

We are aware of the excellent independent travel training that Cardiff Council deliver to young people to provide them with lifelong skills to be able to access places of learning, employment and social opportunities by giving them the skills and confidence to use public transport. Although this type of intervention will not be suitable for everyone, we would like to encourage more local authorities, and learning institutions to consider alternative options.

Transport to extra-curricular activities, including provision such as breakfast clubs, is a challenging issue faced by all children and young people. The current legislation does not require local authorities to provide transport for these activities. The 2022 LTM review highlighted the fact that even if we did have the financial resources to support such provision, the weakness in current networks and infrastructure make implementing and expansion of provision difficult. Put simply, we do not have the bus drivers, the bus operators, the capacity in our school buildings or the resources locally to be able to provide school transport for extra curricular activities on top of the statutory provision. Our aspirations to introduce a locally informed franchised bus network, complemented by community transport networks does, we hope, provide opportunities to address some of these accessibility issues for children and young people across Wales by maximising the resources available.

The LTM Recommendations report that we hope to publish shortly recommends an immediate update the statutory guidance document to improve consistency of provision across the local authorities and ensure alignment with legislative changes that have taken place including the enactment of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018. The evidence that you have presented will help inform the update to these guidance documents. This will include ensuring that local authorities and other delivery partners consider best practice regarding procurement of contracts to include minimum standards of awareness and training around transporting children with ALN.

Pupil Absence Report:

Could you outline the Welsh Government's current position on our recommendation?

The reasons for absence in schools is multifaceted. The Welsh Government will continue to explore the causes of low levels of learner attendance at schools and how this might be addressed at local and national level. We will use the findings to inform policy developments and interventions.

Our ambition will be to deliver a learner first approach to learner travel, however we have to be realistic to the challenges that were highlighted in the first review around transport networks, tools and resources required to deliver effective services for home to school transport. The internal evaluation and analysis exercise undertaken earlier this year collated a wide range of local, national and international evidence to identify innovative approaches to learner travel provision. Local authorities across Wales are already deploying some excellent and innovative practice to maximise resources to enhance transport provision to learners and the broader community. We want to embed the right structures so local authorities and other delivery partners can share and disseminate best practice to improve consistency of provision and to ensure that the transport infrastructure is in place to reduce any barriers to accessing education.

Petitions:

As we approach the end of the year, can you advise what has happened since this advice was submitted to you over the summer? What will be the next steps, and when will they result in change on the ground for learners across Wales? While we acknowledge the complexities around learner travel and the ongoing financial challenges faced across the public sector, we believe there is a real need for pace and urgency when dealing with this important issue.

An internal analysis and evaluation exercise was conducted earlier this year. The Committee will be sent a copy of this report which outlines a set of recommendation to improve the consistency and quality of learner transport provision across Wales.

Children's Commissioner:

We would welcome your views on the Commissioner's recommendation for a free public transport pilot for children and young people under 18 within this Senedd term.

One of the key aims of the Welsh Government's Transport Strategy, Llwybr Newydd, is to reduce the cost of sustainable travel for **everyone** in Wales, including young people.

Within the current operating model children up to the age of 5 will be allowed to travel free on local buses when accompanied by an adult. Those between 5 years old and up to 16 years

will also be able to receive either half fare or 1/3 off the normal bus fare, dependent on the bus operator, or if the service is operating under contract to the local authority.

We have looked at a range of options to make travel on public transport easier, more accessible and affordable for all in the community by simplifying the fares and ticketing system. We have undertaken a comprehensive piece of planning work around options to deliver a 'Fairer Fares' offer for bus passengers in Wales, which has included the potential introduction of capped single fares, zonal fares, integrated bus and rail ticketing and enhanced young person's ticketing. Some of these initiatives are currently being trialled on the Transport for Wales operated TrawsCymru network and we will be using this learning to inform a long term, sustainable and affordable solution that will encourage modal shift for all.

Under the current operating model, the only way we can offer discounted or free travel is to negotiate reimbursement arrangements with operators which has proven to be costly, as has been seen with the free travel offer for under 22s in Scotland. The proposed Bus Bill, which we will be bringing to the Senedd in 2024, will provide us with the opportunity to look a fresh at bus service delivery across Wales, including taking forward our work on fairer fares (and therefore the possibility around an enhanced provision for children and young people). As our aims are ambitious, these reforms will take time, but it is vital that we get this right to support all citizens of Wales.

In the meantime, we fund and provide the MyTravelPass scheme for 16 to 21 year olds which provides approximately 1/3 off the cost of bus travel. There are also a number of discounted bus network tickets available across Wales and a number of opportunities for discounted travel on the TfW rail network. The report recently published by the Welsh Youth Parliament, *Sustainable Ways*, has highlighted the need to undertake further work to ensure children and young people are aware of these schemes. We have therefore asked Transport for Wales to undertake a campaign to raise the profile of the discounts available for children and young people travelling on public transport.

Children in Wales:

What work is the Welsh Government doing to alleviate the cost of living pressures on transport costs for children, young people and their families?

The Welsh Government provides funding to local authorities for pre-16 provision in schools through the Local Government Revenue Settlement in the form of the Revenue Support Grant (RSG). The RSG is not ring-fenced; the funding allocated to each authority is available to the authority to spend as it sees fit on the range of services for which it is responsible, including school transport. In determining the level of funding required to deliver their statutory duties local authorities may draw on other sources of funding outside the RSG.

In 2022/23 local authorities reported a total spend of £160 million on home to school transport. The latest published data outlining local authority spend on education, including learner travel, is available at the following link: [Education revenue outturn expenditure, by authority and service \(£ thousand\) \(gov.wales\)](https://gov.wales/government-accounts/education-revenue-outturn-expenditure-by-authority-and-service-2022-23)

As outlined above we have committed, along with Transport for Wales, to take forward a piece of work to run a targeted campaign and develop relevant and accessible resources, to ensure that children and young people are aware of all the public transport assistance they can access including:

- Children up to the age of 5 years old travel free on bus services across Wales and then either at half fare or two thirds the normal adult fare from the age of 5 and up to 16 years old.

- The Welsh Government's "MyTravelPass" is a discounted travel scheme, which is available for all young people aged 16 to 21 years. This £2 million scheme provides approximately 30% off the standard adult bus fare on local bus services across Wales. For further details of the scheme please see the following link: [Home !\[\]\(83eb2aa26b610eb6a9dca7cf4702d681_img.jpg\) mytravelpass | Welsh Government](#).
- There are also various discounted bus tickets offered by the different bus operators across Wales.
- Under 11's can travel for free on Transport for Wales operated rail services and under 16's can travel for free on off-peak Transport for Wales services when accompanied by a fare paying adult.
- Additionally, the 16-17 Saver railcard is also available for use on all rail services across Wales and England offering 50% off most rail fares every day of the year with no time restrictions and no minimum fare for an annual cost of £30.
- the Education Maintenance Allowance funding for further education can be used to support travel costs: [Education Maintenance Allowance, funding for Further Education | Student Finance Wales](#)

The Welsh Government has also compiled a list of support and advice to help individuals and families with the cost of living. This information is regularly updated and can be accessed on the following link: [Get help with the cost of living | GOV.WALES](#)

Welsh Youth Parliament:

What are your views on the recommendations made by the Welsh Youth Parliament?

Please see attached Annex A, our written response to the Welsh Youth Parliament.

Financial pressures on local authorities:

To what extent is the Welsh Government monitoring changes in local authority provision as a result of financial constraints; and the impact that is then having on learner engagement and attendance?

We monitor local authorities school transport provision closely through our work with the Association of Transport Coordinating Officers (ATCO), which provides a forum for local authorities to raise any concern on this issue. As part of the recent analysis and evaluation exercise, we reviewed all 22 local authority home to school transport and received survey responses from 14 local authorities who provided information on their costs, delivery models, issues and barriers associated with home to school transport in relation to the Measure and associated guidance.

Some really excellent practices have been identified with local authorities thinking creatively and innovatively about their learner travel provision. For example, the invest-to-save independent travel training provision in Cardiff and Monmouthshire Council reviewing their community transport provision and collaborating with bus operators to maximise the opportunities for children and young people to use public transport networks to access their places of learning. We support and encourage more of this integrated approach and joined up service delivery across Wales.

I hope this letter provides you with the reassurances required at this time by your committee.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Julie James". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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