

# Public Transport in Blaenau Gwent

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 4 Chwefror 2020  
Petitions Committee | 4 February 2020

Petition Number: P-05-934

Petition title: Public Transport in Blaenau Gwent

Text of petition: The people below would like to raise their concern about the poor public transport within the Blaenau Gwent area. This has led to residents having difficulty travelling to their place of work. They also experience problems attending hospitals and doctors for medical attention. The cut backs have also made travelling at best time consuming and arduous and in some cases impossible.

## 1. Background

While primary legislative competence for rail services is reserved, the Welsh Government has executive responsibility for the procurement and operation of the Wales and Borders rail franchise, which is managed by Transport for Wales (TfW) and operated by KeolisAmey trading as TfWRail.

However, while the Welsh Government has powers to invest in rail infrastructure, executive responsibility for rail infrastructure policy and funding is not devolved



and is the responsibility of the UK Secretary of State for Transport. The Welsh Government receives no block grant allocation for rail infrastructure.

Bus services were deregulated in the 1980s and the majority of Welsh local bus services operate on a commercial basis. However, local authorities have a duty to secure the provision of such public transport services as they consider appropriate to meet any public transport requirements which would not otherwise be met. This includes the procurement of subsidised services. Taxi and private hire vehicles licensing and regulation are also handled at a local authority level.

The Assembly has extensive competence to legislate for bus, taxi and private hire services, although significant areas, such as Public Service Vehicle operator licensing, remain reserved.

## 2. Welsh Government action

The Welsh Government awarded the contract to operate the Wales and Borders Rail Franchise and rail aspects of the South Wales Metro to KeolisAmey, trading as TfWRail Services, in October 2018. While the Ebbw Vale line which serves Blaenau Gwent is not currently included within the Valleys electrification programme, the new contract includes a commitment to implement a new one train per hour Ebbw Vale to Newport service by 2021. The Welsh Government has introduced additional refurbished rolling stock for use on the line, and TfW has prepared an (as yet unpublished) outline business case for infrastructure investment to increase capacity to four trains per hour from Ebbw Vale to Cardiff and Newport.

The letter from the Minister for Economy and Transport to the Chair on the petition notes that brand new rolling stock will be introduced from 2022. He also states that the Welsh Government is funding Blaenau Gwent Council to produce a study on Abertillery:

... considering the key issues and opportunities in the valley and identifying potential transport interventions to address these and meet our wellbeing objectives.

In terms of bus services, the Welsh Government consulted on a White Paper: improving public transport, between December 2018 and March 2019. This included proposals for:

- local authority powers to enter into Enhanced Quality Bus Partnerships;
- local authority powers to establish bus franchises;

- local authority powers to establish their own bus operations; and
- improved public transport information and monitoring.

The Welsh Government intends to introduce a Bill to implement these measures during the current Assembly term.

In July 2019 the Minister issued a Written Statement: Update on the Public Transport (Wales) Bill and wider bus reform agenda. On the Bill, the statement says:

The changes proposed in the Bill will seek to address some of the negative impacts of de-regulation on users, operators and authorities, by creating a number of tools which would enable local authorities to intervene should they chose to do so. Using these tools alone however, will not halt or reverse the decline in bus patronage.

Our aim is to increase the number of people using public transport by encouraging travellers to switch from private car use, thereby reducing congestion, carbon emissions and improving air quality and economic performance. We want to see more people using public transport to get them where they need and want to be, quickly and on time.

The statement also outlined wider work on bus services, including pilots for Integrated Responsive Bus Travel which had been announced previously by the Welsh Government. One of these pilots, expected to commence mid-2020, is in Blaenau Gwent.

While the responsibility for provision of local bus services rests with local authorities, the Welsh Government supports services financially through a number of funding mechanisms. The Draft Regulatory Impact Assessment for the planned Public Transport (Wales) Bill indicates that in 2017-18 the Welsh Government made £116m available for public buses.

Additionally, the Welsh Government provides funding to local authorities to invest in transport infrastructure, including through the Local Transport Network Fund, Local Transport Fund, Active Travel Fund, Road Safety Fund and Safe Routes in Communities Fund. Referring to these grants, the letter from the Minister says:

We have awarded £850,000 to Blaenau Gwent Council in 2019-20 for active travel schemes, safe routes to schools and bus stop infrastructure enhancement.

The Bus Services Support Grant (BSSG) is paid through local authorities and funds a Live Kilometre Support Grant for operators (a payment to operators per kilometre), and a Local Support Element which can be used in a range of ways, including funding subsidised services. The BSSG and its predecessor have been frozen at £25 million since 2013-14. A [June 2019 Welsh Government press release](#) suggested that “a small but significant number of councils” had withdrawn bus funding from their own budgets and were relying on the BSSG only.

[StatsWales indicates that Blaenau Gwent council has not spent any revenue funding](#) on support for bus operators for more than ten years (since 2007-08). However, it has received approximately £150,000 each year from the BSSG between 2016-17 and 2018-19.

The [Minister’s paper to the Assembly’s Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee](#) for scrutiny of the 2020-21 draft budget said:

[The Welsh Government appreciates] the difficult decisions that local authorities face as a result of the UK Government’s austerity programme. Nevertheless [we] encourage local authorities to protect the indicative awards they receive through the [Revenue Support Grant] to support bus and community transport services in their areas.

Local authorities are required to confirm the allocations they have made from their RSG awards in support of the bus network in order to help inform my future decisions about allocating Welsh Government support for bus and community transport in Wales. [We] expect to make an announcement in due course.

### 3. National Assembly for Wales action

There has been extensive discussion of bus and rail services in the Assembly – both in general and specifically in relation to Blaenau Gwent. A short sample is included below.

On 27 November 2019 Mark Reckless AM [called a short debate on bus services in Wales](#). He commented:

I think the bus service frequency into Ebbw Vale town centre has halved and I've spoken to constituents who talk about the impact that's had on their social lives, in terms of them being able to get out and about, but it's had a very substantial impact also on the business community in

Ebbw Vale. I hope that the Minister may be able to update us on some of what he said previously in response to my colleague David Rowlands about what was happening in Ebbw Vale and a desire to run pilot schemes there of the demand-responsive bus service of which I've previously spoken about—the operation of that in Newport. I wonder: is this a service that can bring new users into using buses and provide a service where there was previously none, or is it, less positively, something that is a sticking plaster for areas where bus services are being cut, whether because of funding pressures or congestion issues, and it is an alternative to that, rather than an addition?

In response, the Minister commented:

Mark Reckless asked the question of whether such pilots—demand-responsive pilots—will likely lead to people who have previously relied on their car to actually leave the keys at home and use those new innovative services. Now, where we've seen similar schemes operating in the UK, we've been able to appreciate that there has been a significant modal shift. I recently attended the Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee and I pointed to one specific scheme in south Liverpool that has seen that around 52 to 53 per cent of users of that demand-responsive bus service actually were people who have never used the bus service in that area before; they are leaving their cars at home. So, it does offer great potential to increase patronage very significantly across the bus network.

On 25 September 2019, during a Finance Committee debate on the Government's spending priorities, Alun Davies AM commented:

Few weeks go by in my advice surgeries in Blaenau Gwent where people do not explain to me the difficulties that a lack of bus services, for example, mean for them in their daily lives—the impact it has on town centres, the impacts it has on people reaching public services, the impact it has on people being able to shop or socialise. If we are serious about cohesion and social justice in our communities, then access to an effective system of public transport has to be at the heart of that. It is clear to me that the bus services at the moment are simply collapsing in large parts of the country, and we need to identify that.

In relation to rail services, on 12 June 2019 David Rowlands AM asked the Minister for an update on progress being made on improving the rail link between Ebbw Vale and Newport. The Minister replied:

... we are committed to taking forward plans to introduce four trains per hour as soon as we possibly can do on the Ebbw Vale line. And it's something that I've been working very closely with the local Member, Alun Davies, on for some time. But I can tell the Member today that we are committed to introduce an hourly service between Ebbw Vale town and Newport from 2021. I'm also pleased to say that brand-new trains will be introduced on the services through Blaenau Gwent during 2022, and this will provide, obviously, increased capacity and level boarding. Those brand-new trains, Llywydd, will provide a massive increase in capacity for passengers, with a total capacity of 425. That compares to today's 292.

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