

WRITTEN EVIDENCE TO THE ENTERPRISE AND BUSINESS COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO BUS AND COMMUNITY TRANSPORT ON 3 DECEMBER, 2015

Introduction

1. The purpose of this paper is to set out for the Enterprise and Business Committee written evidence on bus and community transport in Wales.
2. Bus services are a vital part of Welsh economic cultural and social life. Every day, 63,000 people rely on the bus to get to work and about 350,000 trips are made every day to get to hospital appointments, visit friends, go shopping or access leisure. Bus services have the potential to offer people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds a reliable, flexible, affordable and more sustainable way of travelling.
3. Our ambition for improving bus and community transport is set out in the National Transport Finance Plan, which was published in July. We have committed to improving the quality and accessibility of local bus services and community transport whilst exploring the potential for offering a better deal on bus fares for people on lower incomes.
4. We have delivered on our commitment to maintain mandatory concessionary fares for older and disabled people, together with our scheme to support seriously injured service personnel and veterans. "My Travel Pass" supports younger people by offering discounted bus travel in Wales.
5. Community Transport has a vital role to play in an integrated public transport system and can offer a flexible and cost-effective alternative to conventional public transport. The Welsh Government is providing £108,000 to support the Bwcabus network in 2015-16 and the strong passenger growth which has exceeded targets for Bwcabus demonstrates the effectiveness of this initiative. We continue to encourage local authorities and bus operators to visit and learn lessons from the Bwcabus experience.
6. Another good example is the Grass Routes project in Monmouthshire. I have also funded two Rural Transport Pilots in Ceredigion and the Vale of Glamorgan to explore and trial new ways of utilising local authority fleet vehicles to provide better services for rural communities.
7. The need to find improved ways for people to access healthcare facilities is important. I have commissioned work with the Minister for Health and Social Services to provide a better and more responsive transport service for patients and visitors to access hospitals and other health care facilities across Wales.
8. We are also working with local community transport providers to develop car club schemes in areas where people experience difficulties accessing employment opportunities and services.

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Roles and responsibilities

9. Since bus deregulation was introduced in 1986, the provision of local bus services has been determined by privately owned bus companies based on commercial viability. In Wales, about 73 per cent of the distance travelled by bus in Wales is on a commercially operated service.
10. Under the current legislative framework, local authorities have powers to subsidise services if they identify that those services are socially necessary. Authorities also have a vital role to play in promoting access to education, training, employment, health, shopping and community facilities. Public transport, and buses in particular, play an important role in providing us with access to jobs, education and key services.
11. Community transport has an important part to play in complementing the core bus network, and in particular, in meeting the needs of people who may not have access to conventional public transport, or who require the sort of specialist vehicles and flexible services for which the sector is renowned.
12. Most areas in Great Britain have, however, witnessed a contraction in the availability of local bus services with the notable exception of bus services in London. In Wales, there has been a generalised decline in patronage, bus journeys made in Wales declined in 2009-2010 by 7 per cent and between 2012-2013 by 6 per cent.
13. However, this decline in patronage has not been seen everywhere in Wales. The Cardiff to Pontypridd transport corridor is one of the most important corridors in South Wales. Improvements to reduce journey times on this route has increased patronage on services such as the X4 and 26 services of 4.5 per cent and 9.7 per cent respectively.
14. Community transport has an important part to play in complementing the core bus network, and in particular, in meeting the needs of people who may not have access to conventional public transport. As part of our commitment to link strategic areas, we fund the TrawsCymru network of long distance buses which carries nearly 1.5 million passengers per year.
15. We have launched new services this year linking Wrexham with Barmouth and Aberystwyth with Haverfordwest. We are also improving the Bangor to Aberystwyth service from November 2015 and with new vehicles due to be deployed in March 2016.

Funding

16. Despite the impact of decisions by the UK Government, we have been able in recent years to protect the level of funding that we provide to authorities to enable them to subsidise bus and community transport services. In addition to the £25 million that we provided to local authorities through the Bus Services Support Grant, we are committed to supporting the mandatory concessionary bus travel

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scheme that enables more than 740,000 older or disabled people to ride our buses free of charge.

17. We have also been able to offer support for younger people through the discounted bus travel scheme until end of March 2017.

Levers

18. In January 2014, I established a Bus Policy Advisory Group to advise on how best we can work with public authorities and the bus industry to improve the longer term sustainability of local bus services in Wales. I am considering their detailed advice and in particular the introduction of a Bus Quality Standard which can be introduced to improve bus service quality.

19. Deregulation of the bus market has not delivered the benefits it was meant to across Wales. While some areas are well served with commercial bus services, others rely on heavily subsidised services contracted by local authorities.

20. The legal framework for the organisation of bus services means that delivering our aspirations for improving services for passengers is expensive, complicated and uneven. Integrating bus timetables with other modes, improving the quality of the buses on the road, improving journey times and so on can often only be achieved by voluntary co-operation between operators.

21. Devolution of bus regulation would complement our existing legislative competence in traffic management and service provision in seeking better value for money improving the quality of bus transport for passengers in Wales.