

# Equality of Opportunity Committee

EOC(3)-14-10 : Paper 4

## **Inquiry into the impact of Welsh Government policy on the accessibility of transport services for disabled people in Wales – Evidence from Scope Cymru**

### **About Scope Cymru**

Scope Cymru is a national disability organisation whose focus is people with cerebral palsy. Our aim is that all disabled people achieve equality and enjoy full human rights. Scope Cymru has a particular focus on disabled people with high support needs and complex impairments.

Scope Cymru provides a range of services to disabled people including information, education, transition, employment and residential accommodation as well as campaigning for disabled people's human rights and equality across Wales. For more information on Scope's work visit: <http://www.scopecymru.org.uk/>

We are grateful for the opportunity to provide evidence to the committee and we are happy to answer any questions on either our oral or written evidence the committee members have.

### **The issues of concern to disabled people**

Many of the issues that concern disabled people in transport are the same as those that concern non-disabled people. They want to know that they are going to be able to get to where they intend to go and at the time they intended to do so. However, there are barriers that exist that can prevent them from doing so.

There are still problems with the accessibility of many taxis, buses, trains and both bus and train stations. The report by this committee into the Accessibility of Railway Stations in Wales highlighted that 16 per cent of stations have only part access to the platforms for wheelchair users and 34 per cent have no access<sup>1</sup>. This means that increased planning has to go into journeys made by disabled people, which limits their ability to be independent and take 'on the day' decisions, or react to a problem such as a family emergency, in the same way many non-disabled people take for granted.

This means that one problem that can be particularly concerning for disabled people is when the unexpected occurs. It is difficult enough for any individual when a train is cancelled at the last minute, but having a disability can mean extra planning has had to go into the journey to ensure assistance is available at the other end of the trip.

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<sup>1</sup> National Assembly for Wales Equality of Opportunity Committee, Inquiry into the Accessibility of Railway Stations in Wales, October 2010

Public transport still suffers from reliability issues, which can impact upon journeys made by disabled people even with meticulous planning. Scope Cymru is aware of an individual who arrived at Welshpool station, only to find that her train did not arrive. It was only when other passengers phoned a helpline that anyone was aware that the train would not be turning up. A replacement coach service was available, however, the individual was concerned that she would not be able to get her motorized scooter on the coach, as she is unable to on most regular coaches.

As the station is not manned, she had no way of contacting the rail company as she had no mobile telephone and her vocabulary is limited. She had to use a payphone to contact the care home in which she lives as they were able to understand her as they know her well. The only way to get home was with a mobility taxi which cost her £30, although we are happy to confirm that she has been informed this will be refunded to her.

However, this is not the first time this had occurred, and in her words, it made her 'feel vulnerable and discriminated against'.

This does not just highlight a problem with the accessibility of railways and stations, but also with the fleet of buses that are unlikely to be used only for replacing trains, but also other events that may take place.

The Eisteddfod is a good example of problems that can occur due to the lack of accessibility in transport provided by the private sector.

Despite Scope Cymru contacting the Eisteddfod last year, problems remained with the Eisteddfod this year. Many of the buses that were used were not accessible for disabled people, despite there being parking labeled as 'disabled car parking' in some of the car parks. The problem was not just in getting on the buses, but with the fact that they had no allocated room for wheelchairs.

This was not just a problem for disabled people, but also those with pushchairs were unable to access buses.

This is a problem that Scope Cymru is acutely aware of as our own Director, Suzanne Jones, was affected. There was confusion over which car park she should use and even when she was directed to a particular car park, the next bus was not accessible for her wheelchair. She was then told another one would arrive in 15 minutes that would be accessible but after an hour of waiting this had not arrived and Mrs Jones decided to leave.

The result of this was that Mrs Jones was excluded from the Eisteddfod because of the lack of available accessible transport. Scope Cymru is concerned that any event which uses buses of this nature runs the risk of excluding disabled people if there is no suitable provision available for them.

Another issue highlighted to us by one disabled individual was how intimidating stations can be, particularly late at night. Railway stations tend to be quiet, open planned and often quite dark at night. The individual concerned felt 'vulnerable' when using a station on her own at night. She said this could have been improved upon by just providing better lighting at the stations

## Flexibility

Being able to wake up one morning and decide to go out for the day is something that the majority of people take for granted but current public transport provision makes difficult for disabled people.

But it is also something that is far more important than just being able to go where you please. There are many occasions where plans change throughout the day, whether it be because a meeting, connecting service or event that someone is heading to is cancelled, or a family emergency or similar occurs.

Many train and bus services in Wales are willing to offer assistance to disabled travelers and this is of course something that we welcome. However, the assistance has to be booked in advanced to guarantee that it will be available and does not take into account problems that may occur, or that it may not be a journey that can be booked in advance due to its nature.

This is something that is shared between most transport providers. For example, Megabus, who provide coach services from Cardiff to London, asks disabled passengers to book 48 hours in advance and “megabus.com reserves the right to deny travel on a specific trip in the event that you cannot be safely accommodated within the requested timeframe”<sup>2</sup>. Megabus is often the cheapest method of travelling to London, so if a disabled person does need to travel at shorter notice and is unable to book this far in advance it could be far more expensive to use another service, such as a train.

For example, a ticket leaving the next day and returning the day after on a Megabus costs between £17 and £28<sup>3</sup>, depending on travel time. The same journey on a train with a disabled railcard would cost at between £36.30 and £120.80<sup>4</sup>. Without a railcard it could cost between £55 and £183. Having to take a train instead of a bus could potentially cost a disabled person a significant sum of money.

However, First Great Western also recommend that they are contacted 24 hours in advance of travel.

Many bus companies now provide accessible buses, with low floors to allow those with mobility impairments on and off, wheelchair ramps and room for wheelchairs. However, there are still many buses in Wales that are not equipped like this. Arriva Buses, one of the largest bus companies in Wales, currently has around 83% fully accessible buses<sup>5</sup>. But this means that there is a one in five chance that the bus a disabled person is waiting for is not accessible and they may not be able to get on it.

Arriva Buses will let someone know if an easy access bus will be running on the journey they intended to catch, if they ring on the day of travel. However, it may be that they are catching one they did not intend to catch. This service is also only available between 8am and 6pm Monday and Friday and there is no mention of provision for outside of these hours.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://uk.megabus.com/passengers-with-disabilities.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Prices from megabus.co.uk, prices taken 27<sup>th</sup> October 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Prices from firstgreatwestern.co.uk, prices taken 27<sup>th</sup> October 2010.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.dailypost.co.uk/business-news/business\\_profiles/2009/03/12/arriva-55578-23128279/](http://www.dailypost.co.uk/business-news/business_profiles/2009/03/12/arriva-55578-23128279/)

It also assumes that someone is able to communicate using the phone. This would not be suitable for someone who is concerned about mobility but also has a communication impairment, such as hearing loss or being without speech.

Sensory impairments can also impact upon travel in other ways. Those who are blind or partially sighted may be unable to see the small print available on timetables, or unable to see the numbers and destination on the front of a bus. Electronic displays at bus stops can be easier to read, but these are often unreliable or the information is wrong. When we spoke to disabled people in our Skills Development Centre in Sully one raised with us that his dyslexia meant that he was unable to read the destination on buses and thus did not use them.

## **Regional and National Transport Plans**

The National Transport Plan has access as one of its central themes. However, in this context it is not about just disability access but access to the whole community to services, such as health, education and leisure. This is clearly one of the purposes of the plan and as important in developing the outcomes that it seeks to gain. We also welcome the fact that the plan looks at accessibility within the context of the social model of disability which is important to looking at how barriers to accessibility can be removed.

However, the issues relating to disability access are very separate from those that affect many other members of the community and there is little within the plan that relates only to the specific challenges and barriers that can prevent a disabled person from being able to travel independently.

This theme is also within the guidance for the Regional Transport Plans, and therefore the plans mirror the National Strategy in such that they do not have a particular disability focus.

We see this as a weakness of the guidance and of the Regional Transport Plans. Enabling disabled access to transport should be one of the key parts of the plans and this is missed as a result of it not being a running theme throughout the document. The access issues that affect the majority of people are not always the same as those that affect disabled people, particularly when they may be excluded from one form of local transport, such as if they live near one of the many stations that are not accessible.

It is also a weakness that they do not require local authorities to carry out any form of disability impact assessment on their plan. This would be one simple way in which they could ensure that their proposals do not adversely affect disabled people.

One of their strengths is that they look at transport on a holistic basis and include other issues that can affect disabled people, such as parking and taxis rather than just trains and buses. This means decisions can be taken in context of their wider affect on disabled people.

## **Concessionary fare policy**

We welcome the current Welsh Assembly Government policy of offering free bus travel to disabled people in Wales. This policy can make a real difference to the independence of disabled people and allow them to meet their transport needs.

One concern we have with this scheme lies around the eligibility criteria. For example, what is the logic behind those who have been claiming the higher rate mobility component of disability living allowance being able to claim, but only after a year of claiming the benefit? The barrier to travel will be in existence for that entire time, so why should it only be recognised as such after a year?

There is also an issue that someone whose speech may be slow or difficult to understand is not covered, and the example giving is a stammer. This means only those with no speech seem to be able to claim. The example of a stammer is unhelpful, as in many cases would be considered to be a mild communication impairment. Those with more severe communication impairments may have speech, but it may be difficult for them and they may be able to benefit from concessionary bus travel.

When we spoke to our service users at our Skills Development Centre in Sully and found that many of those there did not make use of this facility. Some were not aware of their entitlement where as others did not see how it would be of use to them as they did not use public transport. While for some individuals it was due to their carer meeting their transport needs using their mobility allowance, for others it was due to the perceived lack of suitable buses for those with mobility problems.

While actual and perceived barriers to disabled people who seek to use buses remain, the impact of this scheme will fall short of its potential.

## **Accessibility issues for pedestrians**

Shared spaces remain a problem for many disabled people in Wales. When kerbs are removed from streets it can present a problem for many blind and partially sighted people who use the kerbs to indicate the side of the road. Without a tactile pavement it can also be difficult for someone who is partially sighted to know where the crossing is and Guide Dogs are reliant on pavements to identify where it is safe for someone to walk.

However Scope Cymru is in favour of looking at the problems in the design of our towns and cities in Wales. There are many existing problems that could be tackled by looking at the way in which we create our environment, but the plans for shared spaces is the wrong direction to be heading.

When there is an appetite for change, instead of going down the route of shared spaces local authorities should engage with disabled people and organisations to look at ways of creating spaces that are more accessible and by involving them in the process solutions that can be found that increase accessibility rather than decrease it in the way shared spaces can.

A lack of dropped kerbs is also an ongoing issue. Many crossings still do not have these available and this can make it difficult for a wheelchair user to access a pavement.

When service users at the Sully Skills Development Centre found that there was a lack of dropped kerbs preventing them from being able to access their local postbox, they wrote to the highways department at the Vale of Glamorgan Council after undertaking their own traffic survey in the area to look at how busy the road was.

An officer from the council agreed to meet with the service users to discuss their concerns. Not only were the dropped kerbs they requested installed quickly, but additional ones in the area also added. The officer also arranged for the word 'slow' to be painted on the roads as well as for overgrown hedges blocking signs in the area to be cutback. Service users were also invited to visit the council gritting facilities.

Service users felt very positive about this whole experience. They felt that they had been genuinely listened to and were 'proud' of what they had achieved and the difference that they were able to make for themselves as a result of the council taking their requests seriously.

They thought that other services should also be willing to come and visit them and talk to them about their concerns.

### **Impact of the Comprehensive Spending Review**

Scope Cymru is concerned that two of the announcements contained within the recent Comprehensive Spending Review by the Westminster Government will adversely affect transport services for disabled people in Wales.

The Westminster Government has announced that they will remove the mobility component of the Disability Living Allowance (DLA) for those living in residential care, which is predicted to save £135 million a year by 2014/15<sup>6</sup>.

The mobility component of DLA is provided to those who either have difficulty walking, or cannot walk at all due to their disability, which may be a physical, sensory or mental impairment.

At present, the lower rate of the mobility component of DLA is £18.95 a week and the higher rate is £49.85<sup>7</sup>.

For disabled people living in a residential setting, the DLA mobility component helps to provide the funds and support they need to leave their care home in order to visit friends and family and access their local community. This is an important aspect of creating a society in which disabled people are included and enabled to participate within their communities and lead a full and active life. Removing DLA from these individuals will hamper these individuals' ability to do this.

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<sup>6</sup> HM Treasury, Comprehensive Spending Review, October 2010

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/DisabledPeople/FinancialSupport/DisabilityLivingAllowance/DG\\_10011925](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/DisabledPeople/FinancialSupport/DisabilityLivingAllowance/DG_10011925)

We are also aware that in some of our residential services in England service users pool their DLA mobility allowances together to pay for an adapted accessible vehicle that all service users can use to get out and about when they want to, whether that's to access community facilities or to visit friends and family. While we do not have any residential services in Wales at present, this may be a model that is replicated by other charities that do provide residential services to disabled people.

We are also concerned about the announcements that local councils will have their budgets cut by 7.1% every year for four years and the ring fencing of all revenue grants will end. This is a devolved area and the responsibility lies with the Welsh Assembly Government. However, this decision will have impacted upon the total block grant received by the Welsh Assembly Government and we are concerned that this cut may be passed on to local government in Wales.

The reduction in local authority budgets may see many councils cutting their funding levels for community transport which many disabled people rely on to be able to leave their homes and access community facilities. This would be a regressive move and we would urge the Welsh Assembly Government not to remove ring fencing and to resist cutting the revenue support grant wherever possible.

## **Recommendations**

- Any event that makes use of private transport must ensure that the provision put in place for disabled people must be adequate and meet their needs.
- Public transport providers should look at ways in which accessibility barriers can be directly overcome, rather than offering assistance around them. This approach will enable disabled people to be truly independent in using public transport.
- Stations should be well lit in order to ensure rail users are comfortable with their surroundings and do not feel vulnerable and left in the open.
- The current concessionary fares policy should be modified to allow people to qualify as soon as they are in receipt of higher rate mobility allowance and include those with serious communication impairments but with some degree of speech.
- The Welsh Assembly Government should look at ways to mitigate the impact of the decision to remove the mobility element of Disability Living Allowance for those living in residential homes to ensure they do not lose the ability to live independent lives and participate in their local community.
- All vehicles used as 'replacement bus services' should be fully accessible, even if this transport is due to an unexpected event, such as a problem with the line or train that should have been used.
- When a local authority wants to redesign elements of the design of their town and city centres, they should engage with disabled people and disabled people's organisations to develop more accessible solutions, rather than implementing shared spaces which can present real barriers to many disabled people.