

# Equality of Opportunity Committee

EOC(3)-16-10 : Paper 1

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

### **Introduction**

Newport Transport is a municipal bus company and the main provider of public bus transport in Newport, operating 47 services including to and from Cardiff and Cwmbran and serving more than 7.6m customers every year. It employs some 250 members of staff including around 150 bus drivers and has a fleet of 87 buses. A number of its customers have disabilities or special needs and through customer engagement, coalition partnerships and a desire to provide a first class bus service Newport Transport has sought to recognise these needs and improve its infrastructure and staff training to meet them.

### **Terms of reference**

Newport Transport would welcome the opportunity to present oral evidence to the inquiry where it could further expand on the measures it has taken to improve the services it operates for disabled passengers – in terms of both bus infrastructure and driver training.

### **What actions has your organisation taken to make transport services accessible to disabled people? Please highlight any initiatives that you consider to be examples of good practice.**

Newport Transport adopts a proactive approach to ensuring the needs of its disabled customers are met. This has been achieved through a wholesale programme of customer engagement and partnership work with charitable organisations and bodies such as the Royal National Institute for the Blind and Guide Dogs for the Blind.

As a company we believe it is important that disabled passengers are treated equally and not made to feel segregated or isolated in recognising their needs.

As part of the company's three-year business plan and previous customer-focused activity, we have executed a series of improvements and enhancements to our bus fleet to make our vehicles even more accessible to customers with special requirements or disabilities. Importantly though we

have recognised that improvements to buses alone will not support the provision of better public bus transport for this population group. What is also required is the implementation of an enhanced and strategically considered bus driver training programme that places a real working emphasis on training frontline staff so that they fully understanding the needs of passengers with special needs or a disability.

With this in mind Newport Transport is one of the only bus operators in the UK to specifically tailor its Certificate of Professional Competence driver training to include comprehensive modules on understanding the needs of disabled passengers. As part of this training bus drivers experience firsthand what it is like to have a disability. This is achieved through the participation of a series of role play scenarios where drivers are asked to wear goggles and ear defenders to experience what it is like to have a visual or hearing impairment, and use a wheelchair and a walking aid to get on and off a bus.

Already nearly 60% of Newport Transport's 87-strong bus fleet is either DDA compliant or features low-level floor access. The procurement of six new vehicles each year will ensure its entire fleet meets this requirement by 2015. Furthermore, all its buses feature CCTV giving piece of mind to all customers, not just those with a disability, and better safeguarding their personal safety.

In May Newport Transport became the first bus operator in the UK to launch an ITSO-compliant smartcard. The PASSPORT smartcard makes it much easier for customers – particularly those with special needs to use our buses, by removing the need for problematic paper passes. Furthermore, if for example a customer who was visually impaired misplaced their PASSPORT, the technology in-bedded in the card means that their data is much more securely protected in comparison to a paper pass which are more easily subject to fraud. Similarly, a PASSPORT card holder's details are kept securely on a central computer database so the card can be easily replaced.

For the future Newport Transport has recently made a commitment to become the first bus operator in the UK to install audio destination announcements on its buses. All new buses procured by the company will feature this important technological attribute, which is of key importance to customers who are either blind or visually impaired. The announcement of this commitment has been applauded by both the Royal National Institute for the Blind and Guide Dogs for the Blind who have worked, but sadly with limited success, to encourage bus operators to take a similar lead. We are delighted to be working in partnership with both charities on the project and further improvements to our buses that can help bus users with visual problems.

Finally, as part of our rebranding of buses and the launch of a new livery we have recognised the importance of clear and prominent signage indicating designated areas for disabled passengers and the importance too of able-bodied customers appreciating their needs. For example, through effective

signage customers now clearly understand where seats are available for those who are blind or visually impaired. Through our engagement with disabled passengers we learnt that for many it can be an issue when designated areas for wheelchair bus users and parents with prams are merged as one. In recognition of this concern Newport Transport has provided separate areas for wheelchair users to those earmarked for parents with prams.

### **How has your organisation worked with others to ensure that transport services are well integrated?**

Newport Transport has, and continues to work with stakeholders including Newport City Council and Newport Unlimited in the provision of an integrated transport system for the City. This has importantly included advising upon the development of a new bus station that meets the needs of bus users in Newport and that of the operators who function in the city. In doing so we have purposefully fed in the views and representations made to us by our customers including those with special needs or a disability.

### **What are the biggest challenges for your organisation in this area? For example, are there any actions that you could take to improve the accessibility of transport services but cannot for some reason?**

Costs inevitably can restrict and constrain investment in improvements to buses to make them even more accessible for disabled passengers and those with special needs. For example, our investment programme in ensuring all our new buses are fitted with audio announcement facilities could easily be expanded to include older buses in our fleet, which is our long term intention. We strongly believe it is for bus companies to steer such improvements themselves and to not be reliant or persuaded through central government support to initiate such projects. However, as a large scale employer in Newport it is important we recognise the need to balance such investments so that they do not impede upon the stability of the company, whilst still benefiting our customers. With this in mind the speed at which we are able to introduce certain improvements to bus facilities can be influenced by the necessity of budgetary prudence.