

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau

The Petitions Committee

Dydd Mawrth, 25 Mai 2010
Tuesday, 25 May 2010

Cynnwys

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Cofnodir y trafodion hyn yn yr iaith y llefarwyd hwy ynddi yn y pwyllgor. Yn ogystal, cynhwysir cyfieithiad Saesneg o gyfraniadau yn y Gymraeg.

These proceedings are reported in the language in which they were spoken in the committee. In addition, an English translation of Welsh speeches is included.

Aelodau'r pwyllgor yn bresennol

Committee members in attendance

Christine Chapman	Llafur (Cadeirydd y Pwyllgor) Labour (Committee Chair)
Andrew R.T. Davies	Ceidwadwyr Cymreig Welsh Conservatives
Bethan Jenkins	Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales
Jenny Randerson	Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru (yn dirprwyo ar ran Michael German) Welsh Liberal Democrats (substitute for Michael German)

Eraill yn bresennol

Others in attendance

Joseph Carter	Multiple Sclerosis Society Cymru
Anthony Wiggins	Multiple Sclerosis Society Cymru

Swyddogion Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru yn bresennol

National Assembly for Wales officials in attendance

Joanest Jackson	Cynghorydd Cyfreithiol Legal Adviser
Andrew Minnis	Dirprwy Glerc Deputy Clerk
Naomi Stocks	Clerc Clerk

"Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 9.30 a.m.
The meeting began at 9.30 a.m."

Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau a Dirprwyon Introduction, Apologies and Substitutions

Christine Chapman: Bore da, a chroeso i'r cyfarfod hwn o'r Pwyllgor Deisebau.	Christine Chapman: Good morning, and welcome to this meeting of the Petitions Committee.
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We have received apologies this morning from Mike German. I therefore welcome Jenny Randerson to the meeting, who is substituting for Mike.

9.31 a.m.

Sesiwn Dystiolaeth: P-03-248 Gwella Mynediad at Drafnidiaeth Gyhoeddus i Bobl ag Anableddau— Tystiolaeth gan MS Society Cymru Evidence Session: P-03-248 Improved Access to Public Transport for People with Disabilities—Evidence from MS Society Cymru

Christine Chapman: Our first petition, from MS Society Cymru, calls on the Welsh Assembly Government to bring forward an action plan to make public transport in Wales accessible for all. I welcome our witnesses from MS Society Cymru to the meeting. Joseph Carter is the policy, press and campaigns manager for MS Society, and Anthony Wiggins is the chair of the Cardiff and Vale branch. Thank you for your papers. We have had your written evidence, so if you would like to make a presentation, Members will then ask questions.

Mr Carter: Thank you, Chair and committee members. Thank you for having us and for welcoming us to the Senedd building. It is always a pleasure to be here.

This is an important issue, not just for the MS Society, but for the wider disabled sector. We came to the Assembly about two years ago and had a few stakeholder meetings, where we tried to work out what the biggest campaigning issues and biggest priorities were for our members; transport was at the top of that list. We had a few examples of members, particularly in north Wales, who had either been or had come close to being stranded at stations. There was a real fear and perception that public transport, albeit what is perceived as public transport, is not really public, but is only for the able-bodied. That applied particularly to the rail network. That was also the case with buses, which we will mention later, but the primary focus of the campaign was the rail network.

Following that, using our own members, as well as information from Arriva Trains Wales, the MS Society surveyed the rail network to get a better idea of how accessible—or indeed inaccessible—it was. The results were probably more shocking than we had expected. We found that 50 per cent of stations were classed as inaccessible, meaning that half the country—and not divided from north to south, or from east to west, but in clusters—is inaccessible to someone in a wheelchair, or to a mother or father with a pushchair or pram. That was mainly due to a series of concrete steps, or perhaps a ramp that was put in long before the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 was passed, which may have seemed like a great idea at the time, but is now classed as dangerous by the disabled sector.

We also found that 83 per cent of stations were unstaffed, meaning that not only people in wheelchairs or other disabled people, but also older people or people on their own found them to be quite scary places. That was an issue not only for us but for the wider voluntary sector. We worked out that only 6 per cent of stations were classed as 24-hour stations or close to it. It was a disappointing picture.

We then set about trying to raise awareness of this issue. There was a statement of opinion in February 2009, which I believe some, if not all, of the Members sitting around this table signed up to. That was very much appreciated. There was a Plenary debate in the Assembly in June on this issue, which brought up the issues that every Member has in their constituencies and regions; that was very useful. Following on from that, we submitted our petition to the Petitions Committee in September 2009, with 789 signatories. Hindsight is a wonderful thing. We were not aware of how long it would take to get this far, and it would have been great if we had kept the petition open, but, unfortunately, we closed it when we submitted it. However, at the time that we had set our internal deadline—the beginning of September 2009—to submit the petition, signatures were still coming in thick and fast.

This issue galvanised not only the MS Society, but anyone whom we spoke to at stations. These were people going about their daily lives—people with no disabilities commuting down the Valleys lines into Cardiff could see with their own eyes that the current system is not fair. We learned, for example, that half of the 15 stations in total between Merthyr and Cardiff are inaccessible to someone in a wheelchair, or with a buggy or a pram. Therefore, something is not right.

What the MS Society was looking for was a steer from the Welsh Government as to how it will take us from the current situation, where half the stations are inaccessible, to the target set by the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 of the rail network being accessible by 2020. We know that this is a complicated issue. It is not simply a devolved issue—many areas are not devolved. However, the Welsh Government is a considerable player in this sector. We know that, in the past, major infrastructure improvements, particularly in Wrexham, have been funded by the Welsh Government, rather than by the UK Department for Transport. We also know that there are many improvements going on at the moment, which my colleague will refer to later. The improvements at platform 0 at Cardiff Central station have, again, been partly funded by the Welsh Government. Therefore, there is a role for the Welsh Government, and for the Assembly Members who are scrutinising that Government, in this process, albeit a confusing one.

Finally, I will mention buses. We found during this campaign that the problems relating to buses were not as severe as those relating to the rail network, and that the stories were not quite as horrifying. If you are stranded on a platform when a train pulls away, for example, and there is a flight of concrete steps, you are stranded; those problems do not really exist with buses. However, we found that, outside the big cities, and once you get into mid and north Wales, many of the smaller bus companies use older stock and so have no capacity for wheelchairs, or for pushchairs and buggies in some cases. That is a devolved issue, and much work has been done through the Local Transport Act 2008 to try to bring in quality bus partnerships, although on a limited scale. We believe that the Welsh Government, as part of its action plan, should do more, either using existing legislation, or using the LCO and Measure process to bring forward further legislation to make quality bus partnerships more common, in big cities, medium-sized towns, and rural areas.

That brings my remarks to a close. I will ask my colleague, Anthony Wiggins, to talk briefly about platform 0, and a useful meeting that we had with the Welsh Assembly Government last week.

Mr Wiggins: You will have to excuse me, because my presentation will not be as professional as Joe's; I am just a poor viewer.

9.40 a.m.

A myriad of companies operate the rail network. NCP runs the car parks, Network Rail runs the infrastructure, Arriva Trains and First Great Western run the franchise, and someone else owns the trains—the leasing companies. Therefore, it is difficult to try to address all the problems in one go. Initially, we were invited to go on a trip with Assembly Government officials, from Cardiff Central station to Swansea station, and back again. The purpose of the trip was to view platform 0 at Cardiff Central station and the redevelopment of Swansea. As far as I can see, the best thing to do with Swansea is to blow it up.

Andrew R.T. Davies: Swansea station, surely?

Mr Wiggins: Yes, the station. I will not tell you where my ex-wife came from. ["Laughter."] The station is diabolical. I fully understand the presentation that was given to us about the modernisation of Swansea station, because it certainly needs it. Vulnerable people, such as disabled people, gay and lesbian people, parents with small children, and so on, would feel disadvantaged at Swansea station. It needs a total revamp. We also went to platform 0 at Cardiff Central station to see the platform as it is, and to hear about the new lift that is intended to be installed to access the platform, and the modernisation that is planned. Getting to platform 0 is rather difficult because of all the building work that is going on around the area. That makes it difficult for someone in a wheelchair, or someone pushing a buggy or a pram. However, that will be a welcome development when it is done.

Going back to the initial proposition, many companies operate the rail network. One of our views is that disabled parking should be free; it is currently free in many places. However, when you ask the question, the answer is, 'NCP runs the parking—it is nothing to do with us', and you are pushed to one side yet again. When we travelled from Cardiff to Swansea, I thought that I had brought enough change with me—I had brought £6. However, it was not enough—it was £8, and I had to get Joe to run around and try to sort things out for me. When I managed to get out of my car, and get my wheelchair out, I saw that the pay and display machines are for people who are able to stand up, and not for people who are in a wheelchair. Therefore, that was one of the first problems we had.

Another big problem—not necessarily with Arriva Trains or Network Rail—is the lack of publicity for the help that is available for people with disabilities. I did a report for the BBC a while back. We travelled from Cardiff Central station to Heath High Level station, down to Heath Low Level station, and back to Cardiff Central station. I was accompanied by a guy from the BBC, with his microphone, and a lady from Arriva Trains. ["Inaudible."] The guy from the BBC had to hold one side of my wheelchair, and the lady from Arriva Trains had to hold the other, to stop me from shooting down the ramp at 90 mph. Otherwise, I would have careered down to the bottom of the street.

The lady from Arriva Trains told me that the company has a care line. When I asked her for the phone number, she said that she did not know what it was. That seems rather strange. If you are coming to meet a disabled person, I would have thought that you would come reasonably well briefed. I looked through Cardiff Central and Swansea stations, and did not see any publicity about the help on offer to disabled people. However, to be fair, the staff were very helpful. I do not know whether I am being cynical in thinking that they were pre-briefed, but they were extremely helpful—they got the ramp out, and I got on and off the train, which was great. They were really good.

Christine Chapman: You have a minute left.

Mr Wiggins: A minute? I thought that I was going pretty fast; I will try to speed up.

Christine Chapman: We have some questions to ask you.

Mr Wiggins: Fine. I have two other points that I wish to make quickly.

On the way back from Swansea, there were two disabled spaces in the carriage. However, two able-bodied people were sitting on one side, and all their luggage was on the other side. Therefore, that had to be cleared out before I could get my wheelchair in. The other point that I wanted to make was about manned stations. If your train is running late, you can sometimes arrive at a so-called manned station, and the person who is manning the station has gone home, so that, when you get off the train, you are stuck in the middle of nowhere.

Briefly, that is my presentation.

Christine Chapman: Thank you both for your evidence. I will ask the first question. The Disability Discrimination Act has been in place since 1995. Why do you believe that there are still significant problems with the accessibility of public transport in Wales?

Mr Wiggins: It is to do with cost. Cost issues reflect on the majority of accessibility problems. It happens with public buildings in towns and cities, and it will cost a lot of money to put the 2005 Act into place. However, the Act is in place, so it should be enforced. I know that money is available. At the last Assembly committee meeting that we attended, we were told that there was £6 million to spend, but that only £700,000 had been spent in that year. Therefore, money is available, and that money needs to be targeted and used in the best possible way.

Mr Carter: The other factor is that, although the Act has been in force since 2005, many different aspects of it were staggered. Therefore, while stations—like many other buildings, such as shops, shopping centres or any sort of structure—need to be in keeping with the Act, trains themselves do not have to be compatible until 2020. Small buses have to be compatible by 2015, larger buses by 2016, and double-decker buses by 2017. Therefore, there is a staggered approach. It is incredibly expensive to do it, and I believe that that is the main stumbling block, as Anthony has just said. Most of our stations were designed in the Victorian era, and perhaps some of the later ones during the Edwardian era. It is only on the Ebbw Vale line—with a few other exceptions—that major brand-new stations have been put into place. Cardiff Central station is a classic example of a grand building that was built in the nineteenth century—it has Great Western Railway pictures all over it. Therefore, it is difficult and expensive to make those changes.

Christine Chapman: Jenny Randerson has the next questions.

Jenny Randerson: Thank you for your evidence. I compliment you on the amount of research that you have done; yours is a detailed paper, which gives us a clear picture. I was particularly interested to read about the stations in my part of the world. Could you say a little more about the extent of the difficulties faced as a result of poor access, and the nature of those difficulties, covering any issues that you have not touched on already? I am particularly interested in the low number of disabled toilets, and the impact that has on the travelling public in general, and on those with disabilities in particular.

Mr Wiggins: I will answer that question, as disabled toilets are one of my beefs. First, when you go to a disabled toilet—when you can find one—it is not clean. I tend to take a bag with me, because I have to use mechanical means as well. I also have to carry alcohol gel with me, because you can pass infections on quite easily, and you end up getting urinary tract infections all the time. There are very few disabled-friendly toilets at stations at all these days, and, unfortunately, the majority of people who use them are not disabled. I will try not to be impolite, but they do not treat them as they would their own. They are dreadful.

9.50 a.m.

On the access issue, again, they are few. Swansea station is not too bad because it is pretty flat, but Cardiff Central station is difficult because the lifts to the platforms are on the wrong side. You have to try and get someone to open up the side doors so that you can get into the right hand side of the station, from the back, to use the lifts. On Friday, when we went on our tour, it was explained to us that the lifts are past their sell-by date and are due to be replaced next year. In fact, the one lift that we wanted to use was broken. However, when the lifts are working, it means going through the station itself and around to the right hand side. As I said, I took a tour previously with the BBC, and we went to smaller stations like Heath High Level, where there was no manned help. Unless the guy from the BBC and the lady from Arriva Trains had been with me, I would not have been able to get off the platform.

Mr Carter: It comes down to the issue of independence. It is very difficult for a disabled person, particularly someone in a wheelchair, or someone with a visual disability or a hearing impediment to be spontaneous when it comes to public transport in Wales, particularly in relation to rail. Although there is assistance out there on some of the bigger stations, and although the information can be quite difficult to come by—although there is the care line that Tony referred to—it is very difficult for someone who has a disability just to turn up at the station and make a journey like anyone else around this table or most people in this country would. I know that the train operating companies argue that, if you ring ahead, they can make your journey more straightforward, but if that journey means that there are whole sections of the country that you cannot go to because of the stations, and so you have to go to the next station on the line to be able to get down to the local high street and then get a taxi 20 miles back down the road, that lengthens your journey massively. It also has real ramifications for your independence and dignity, and it means that you have to have a special service specifically for you, which is very difficult.

Tony mentioned briefly in his introduction the example of trains coming in late and staff having left. Wrexham is a good example of this. We know a few of our members who have had meetings in Cardiff and have taken the last train back to Wrexham, but, because of a delay, they have either arrived and found that the lifts are about to be switched off and they were very lucky to avoid being stranded, or, a couple of times, Arriva staff have said that it would be best if they got off at Shrewsbury rather than stay on the train as far as Wrexham, because they will be stranded if they go to Wrexham. That happened to a colleague of mine. Going from Shrewsbury to Wrexham is quite a trek by taxi even if it is funded by Arriva, and it is quite a massive diversion from the 'normal' journey that you would expect to make. If you want to travel to Cardiff from Chepstow, you have to go up the track and away from Cardiff to Caldicot, I think, and come back down again. The road entrance to that station comes onto the one platform but not the other. That means that, if a person was going with a friend who was not disabled and was able to get on the train normally, either that person, if it was not planned, would have to go ahead, or everyone's journey would have to be lengthened, and that clearly is not fair.

Jenny Randerson: I will move on now to the current improvement work. Improvement works are being carried out to improve accessibility. Do you feel that there is a joined-up approach to this work? To what extent do you believe that the accessibility of public transport has improved as a result of the improvement works?

Mr Carter: Prior to last Friday, when Tony and I met with civil servants and Network Rail for our little tour, our perception was that there was very little co-operation, and that the approach was not joined up at all. In our paper, we gave the example of £100,000 being spent on improving closed-circuit television and information services at Grangetown in 2003, yet no money was spent on getting past the fact that you have to go up 20 concrete steps to get to the station. However, I think that things have improved. The Welsh Government's Department for the Economy and Transport appears to be working more closely with the UK Department for Transport to spend some of the money set aside from the Access for All fund, although the improvements have been very slow.

We know that a lot of money has been spent on a 'hump', as it is called, at Aberdyfi station, where the platform is lower than average, which is rare. Even if the ramp on the train were to come out, the gradient would be too steep for a wheelchair ever to get on it. So, efforts have been made to build a hump to raise the platform, albeit at a small section by the door. There is an example of that being carried out at Valley station as well. However, there is a massive backlog, and we are not seeing a concerted plan by the Welsh Government to try to make stations better across the board, either using its own resources or, more importantly, those available to Wales via the Access for All fund. Yes, this does cost money, and yes, capital improvements are very expensive, unfortunately, but the situation of how drastic these improvements have to be varies.

Swansea, as we said, is an example of a station that has had massive investment, but many stations require only a new ramp, which could be built outside. We have seen a very long and good-quality ramp being put in at Llansamlet. There was open land around the station, so it was possible to do that. With stations in built-up residential areas, it is more difficult to do that, but even the use of things like mechanical stairlifts and lifts like that seen on platform 0 at Cardiff Central station—improvements that have a range of costs—can make a real difference for disabled people. I am not just talking about children in wheelchairs, but people who have a range of disabilities. However, we are not seeing a long-term commitment from the Government or a publicly available strategy document on how this is going to happen. We know that some improvements are happening, the short-term improvements, but we do not know the Government's long-term plan.

Christine Chapman: I want to move on to questions from Andrew R.T. Davies, and I want to make sure that we also have enough time to talk to Mr Carter about the action plan that he mentioned.

Andrew R.T. Davies: Thank you very much for your evidence this morning, Mr Carter, and I apologise for being slightly late. I pay tribute to the weight of evidence that you have brought forward today; it is very clear and concise. From anyone's point of view, the situation that people who have disabilities face in trying to access public transport can be seen clearly.

The questions that I want to touch on flow from some of my experiences in dealing with the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association. It has talked about the inability to have that joined-up approach to public transport. Some aspects of public transport are better than others. The association cited the example of railways, where staff members tend to be somewhat more informed and helpful, as opposed to some bus operators, which, sadly, have little or no understanding of the needs of someone who has a visual impairment. Do you concur with the view that the lack of transport integration blocks the ability of people who have disabilities to continue their journeys via public transport? For argument's sake, they might have a good experience on the railways—although, as you pointed out, certain stations do not have the ability to deal with all disabilities—but then, if they need to continue the rest of their journey by bus, for example, bus operators provide few or no services that meet their requirements. Staff training in particular is very poor and so, regrettably, staff are not up to speed with some of the help that they could afford the user.

10.00 a.m.

Mr Carter: You touched on two issues there. First of all, you can build some of those improvements into the system. It is rare to have an example such as Cardiff, where the bus station is so close to the train station. We were in Swansea on Friday, and there is quite some distance between the Quadrant bus station and the main railway station, although there are Swansea Metro buses going backwards and forwards. You can build in a solution to that. For example, I know from talking to colleagues in the visual disabilities sector that, by changing the type of path that you have, you can build a route from the station to the main bus stops, and it could be a tactile route so that you or your guide dog could feel your way there.

The other issue that you raised is that of information and training. Both sectors could do with more disability awareness training. That would be a quick win. It is difficult for the Government to have a direct input into that, because it is an issue for human resources, but the Government can have an influence through policy statements.

Andrew R.T. Davies: The Government can have an impact because it can tailor the contracts to the public users to make sure that the training is of a certain standard. Therefore, it can control it via the contract. Do you believe that the way to address this is to place tighter contractual obligations on providers? We have heard that there is now a multiplicity, or plurality, of providers, but often there is only one commissioning body, which is in the public sector.

Mr Wiggins: You touched on the point that there should be a contractual basis to providers providing the information. As I have said, we toured Cardiff and Swansea, and there was no information whatsoever about provision for people with disabilities. The only information that we had was the information that the Assembly Government officials who came with us already had, and which they handed out to us. The train operating companies had no information whatsoever. To run an integrated transport system, one of the biggest things that is needed is information, but there is a lack of it.

I find that rail staff are better trained than staff on buses. I have always found rail staff to be very helpful. The people who operate buses—and operators tend to run individual routes nowadays—just want to take our money and push us into the corner. So, there is no integrated transport policy as such. As you said, it should be done on a contractual basis. When you award a franchise, for example, that should be written down, and providers must comply with it.

Christine Chapman: Finally, Bethan has a question on the action plan.

Bethan Jenkins: Thanks for your evidence. I have two questions. First, can you clarify whether the action plan would refer to all aspects of public transport or just to rail? Quite a lot of the information concentrated on improving railway stations. Secondly, on the broader aspects of the action plan, you evidence a number of improvements that you feel should be prioritised. I would support your recommendation to re-regulate the bus industry. I think that many of the problems that you have stem from the fact that there are so many different bus companies that are responsible for these issues. If you had a magic wand or if you were the Minister for a day, what would be the one big thing that you would change? What would be the one thing in the action plan that you would prioritise?

Mr Wiggins: There would be quite a few things, many of which can be done quite cheaply. As I said earlier, there is a total lack of information. Providing more information would be an easy task. Training should also be improved. Many people who work around disabled people think that they might be able to damage them or that they might catch something. Years ago, in my days out of this wheelchair, I used to play a lot of rugby. I bumped into an old friend of mine, who was a school teacher, at a rugby club. He said, 'Tony, what's wrong? You've hurt your leg, have you?', and I said 'No, I've got MS'. He had had his hand out to shake mine but he pulled his hand away, because his perception was that some of these illnesses are catching. They are not. That perception is down to a lack of information and training. You can put information and training into place reasonably easily and inexpensively, so that would be the biggest thing that I would like to see.

Obviously, we would like to see trains with level floors and sliding doors. We are pragmatists, and we know that these things will not happen overnight, because they are expensive and rolling stock is expected to run for 40 years nowadays. However, simple procedures can be put in place. For example, if a train is running late, staff who manage stations should be paid overtime so that they stay on. The train companies might have to pay half an hour's overtime, but it is another simple fix. As I said previously, our belief is that disabled car parking should be free. However, even if it is not free, the pay and display machines must be the right height for someone in a wheelchair, and not someone who is standing up.

Mr Carter: To address the point of whether the action plan is for all public transport or just for rail, we were looking at the whole area of public transport. Yes, I must say that a great deal of our evidence is on rail, but that is mainly because the examples were arguably more horrific and the evidence was more forthcoming, I suppose. It was more accessible, if you will excuse the pun. Most of the things that Tony referred to are short-term measures that cover all forms of public transport. Training and disability awareness cover bus drivers as well as rail staff. In the report, we talk about the availability of low-floor buses, which are far more common in bigger cities, such as Cardiff, Swansea and Newport. The Baycar bendy bus that serves Cardiff bay has a low floor, but the driver still has to lower the ramp so that someone in a wheelchair can finally access it. So, that comes down to the individual member of staff. Not to damn the entire industry, but a minority of people regard the job of driving a bus to be just about driving the bus, not about the customer care that Tony referred to. You get that customer service more often on a train. That is a problem in a minority of situations, but that attitude is still out there. All of the things that Tony referred to are short-term measures—quick hits that can make real improvements.

With regard to long-term policy—something that the Minister can address—pushing the issue of quality bus partnerships is a key measure that would bring real benefits. We mentioned reregulation as one option. That obviously had its flaws. If you were to reregulate the entire bus industry, it would be very difficult to get those improvements everywhere. Our thoughts were that, by looking at quality bus partnerships, which would mean partial reregulation in certain corridors, you could make those improvements. Certain corridors would be targeted: the local authority could raise the kerbs and the bus company would introduce low-floor buses. That would be a very good way of dealing with that.

Christine Chapman: Mr Carter, I am sorry, but we will have to draw this session to a close.

Mr Carter: That is fine. Thank you, Chair.

Christine Chapman: I apologise for the constraints on time.

Mr Carter: Thank you for having us.

Christine Chapman: Unfortunately, we have a long agenda today. If there is anything else that you would like to give evidence on in this respect, we would be very happy to receive something in writing. I apologise for the constraints on time, but we also have other items to discuss. Thank you both for coming along this morning. It is a very important issue. I echo Jenny's comments; I found the research that you have carried out to be very interesting. You are welcome to head up to the public gallery. We will not discuss your evidence until you are up there; we will carry on with the next part of the agenda. However, as I said, if you want to send us any more information, we are more than happy for you to do that. Thank you both for coming along today.

10.10 a.m.

Y Wybodaeth Ddiweddaraf am Ddeisebau Blaenorol Updates to Previous Petitions

Christine Chapman: The first petition is P-03-162, which calls for road safety improvements in Llanspyddid. The Deputy First Minister has stated that the safety review on this part of the A40 has been completed, including a review of the speed limit, and that officials are finalising the report. We are awaiting the outcome of the safety review and I know that the clerking team is going to chase this up. Are you happy for us to write to Ministers to ask for clarity on completion dates for the projects and work mentioned in correspondence?

Andrew R.T. Davies: Yes. However, I think that the last letter is particularly poor—it says nothing. They should have had the courtesy to tell us roughly when this report will be ready, because that is what the committee would then be able to tell the petitioners. I am not sure whether we need to be clearer about this in our correspondence with Ministers or whether it is something that we need to emphasise time and again. We only meet fortnightly, and that letter tells us and the petitioners nothing. We need an idea of when the report will come forward so that we can understand what action the Minister may or may not be able to take.

Christine Chapman: That is something that we will consider in terms of how we chase up letters and correspondence. That is a point well made. Thank you.

The next petition is P-03-187, which calls for the Severn bridge tolls to be abolished. Recent correspondence from the Deputy First Minister clearly states that the Welsh Government has no legislative powers over the bridges, and that it is the responsibility of the UK Government to undertake an impact assessment of the tolls. It is up to you. What actions should be taken? Are you happy to close the petition?

Bethan Jenkins: The fact that there is a new Government might make a difference. Is it worth revisiting the issue given that there is a change of Government and that there might be some leeway? I do not know.

Jenny Randerson: What has surprised me all the way along is that the Government here has been so passive on this issue. It may not be something for which it has any responsibility, but it does have a considerable interest in it. It is very common for the Government to make representations to the UK Government, and I cannot see why it has not done so on this issue. I find the whole approach surprising. I have no idea whether it is worth doing anything about it now, but it might be worth raising the issue of the impact on business with the new Minister. There is a considerable amount of impact on business, is there not?

Andrew R.T. Davies: There are two things here. First, if you look at the wording of the petition, you will see that there is no timeline for the abolition of the tolls. However, from the investigative work that we have done, we understand that, by 2016, the bridge will have been paid for. I am led to believe that, after 2016, the Government of the day needs to establish an endowment fund for the bridges' future maintenance requirements. I am led to believe—I am not sure whether it is in the correspondence—that there is an opportunity to do that over a five-year period, to build up a war chest, if you like. Therefore, that is one aspect—the legislative aspect—which is included in the Act that set up the bridge and the toll mechanism. Then there is the Welsh Government's aspect. I would have thought that it would be seriously interested in this, because it is the main arterial route, but, sadly, it has not given us any feel that negotiations are taking place between the two Governments. The year 2016 is not a million miles away. No-one really knows how much money needs to be put together for the maintenance endowment fund that I have spoken about; it would have been good to get that information so that we know whether any steps have been taken. I have been lobbied extensively by hauliers who have graphically emphasised the real cost to their business of the rise in tolls, although they mitigate that by saying how important the bridge is for transport and how much travel time it saves.

So, we need a better understanding of what role, if any, the Welsh Assembly Government is taking in negotiations with Westminster, irrespective of which parties are in power in Westminster, to map the future. I do not think that any of the correspondence that we have received gives us a taste of that. I may be missing something, but I would like a feel from the Deputy First Minister as to whether he or his officials are raising this issue when they meet their counterparts in Westminster.

Christine Chapman: Are you suggesting that we have more correspondence with the Deputy First Minister on this point? Would you be happy with that?

Andrew R.T. Davies: I fully understand the limitations on what the Deputy First Minister can do, but the petition is asking about the future of tolls on the bridge. It is as if he is washing his hands of this and saying 'This is nothing to do with me, guv'.

Bethan Jenkins: We need to get some clarification on what preparatory work he is doing, because 2016 will come, and we do not want to just arrive at 2016. We need to know what plans he is putting in place for when it is handed over and for when the endowment fund has to be in place. That is something that we need to ask.

Christine Chapman: There was some indication of that, but we need further information. The Deputy First Minister did mention that he would be looking at that at a later stage.

Bethan Jenkins: Yes, but we need more detail.

Christine Chapman: Yes.

Andrew R.T. Davies: Perhaps we could have a map of what is happening with the Severn bridge that we could send to the petitioners. I do not think that, to date, the petitioners feel that they have received value for money out of this.

Christine Chapman: Okay, we will do that.

10.17 a.m.

Trafod y Dystiolaeth Discussion of Evidence

Christine Chapman: We will now discuss the evidence of the Multiple Sclerosis Society Cymru. We have received correspondence from the Deputy First Minister and the Chair of the Committee on Equality of Opportunity, which is in your pack. We have received evidence from the Deputy First Minister that a range of improvement works has been completed and are planned, and that there are two issues that we need to consider. Are there any thoughts on this, following the evidence session?

Andrew R.T. Davies: I am grateful for the level of evidence that has been given to the committee. The oral evidence has complemented what we have received in written form. This is a very big issue in Wales. It has the strength of legislation behind it, because legislation will be kicking in that will place a requirement on providers, but I think that there is a piece of work for us as a committee to undertake, such as a small inquiry, similar to the one that we did on inland waterways. While the legislation is there, there seems to be a breakdown in terms of people taking that legislation on board and doing the preparatory work that is needed.

So, I would like us to undertake a short inquiry into this issue and to bring the Deputy First Minister before the committee so that we can hear his views. The Government, to be fair, has done work on this, but evidence given this morning suggests that more could be done. The Enterprise and Learning Committee has also undertaken an inquiry into rail infrastructure—I presume that that extends to railway stations, and not just to tracks. Perhaps we could liaise with our colleagues on that committee to see what evidence it gathered on the facilities provided in stations and to see what work we need to undertake. So, I recommend that we consider undertaking a short inquiry and invite the Deputy First Minister to come in.

10.20 a.m.

Jenny Randerson: I agree with that. There are so many strands to this. The MS Society, in relation to buses, provides various sensible options on how to improve the impact of quality bus partnerships and how they could be developed to improve the situation. There are obviously more complex issues in relation to trains, because the Deputy First Minister is right—it is not all devolved. However, I am not aware of how much the Government here ensures that when money is being spent on improving stations that accessibility issues are to the fore or how much it prioritises accessibility in terms of that spending. I was concerned to read in this evidence about the Railways for All money. That is the UK Department for Transport's money, our Barnett share of which should work out at £1 million over three years, but we have only received £400,000. In general, we have an awful lot of small stations and this money is for those, so £400,000 goes practically nowhere. I do not think that we are getting a fair crack of the whip and that might be because we do not have this clear message. It would be a good idea to get the Deputy First Minister in to give him an opportunity to fully explain his approach because I did not find his response, that he could not do an action plan because these matters were not all devolved, a very useful one. However, I am sure that there are things are going on that we should hear about.

Christine Chapman: Bethan, do you have any thoughts on this?

Bethan Jenkins: I just want to ensure that we do not replicate what the Committee on Equality of Opportunity has already done so that, if we undertook an inquiry here, we would bring in strands of that committee report to this one. In any committee inquiry, we should look specifically at the action plan element. Given that the Deputy First Minister has said that it is something that we cannot do because of the non-devolved issues, we would need to specify the devolved and the non-devolved aspects so that we can be clear about how we would implement this or take the work forward. We could contact Network Rail and Arriva Trains Wales in seeking evidence. We know that the Deputy First Minister has responsibility for these issues, but those companies have responsibility for administering this on the ground, so I would not want to leave them out when we take this forward. Transport user groups could also help us with this, including the MS Society Cymru, which could also feed into this inquiry.

Christine Chapman: It might be an idea to get a paper on this from the Members' research service so that we can explore where the gaps are so that we do not duplicate other committees' work. I know that the Enterprise and Learning Committee made recommendations on access when it conducted an inquiry, so we need to find out what has not been covered. I think that we can do that with the Members' research service.

Andrew R.T. Davies: We will ask them to draft a scoping paper so that we do not duplicate work done, as Bethan said, by the Committee on Equality of Opportunity. We would then be able to see what ground has been covered and where our focus should be to try to make a difference.

Ms Stocks: I think that it is useful to highlight the fact that you have said, as a committee, that you would be interested in undertaking an inquiry on another two petitions: action for children, which we are considering later, and the peace institute petition in terms of the petitioners calling for the task and finish group. So, it might be useful for us to consider that in order to plan a work programme. It might be worth us bringing a paper to the committee for the next meeting so that we can get clear decisions on where the committee wants to focus its time because there is a limited amount of time before the next Assembly elections in which we can get some work done on these issues.

Bethan Jenkins: If we had the MRS paper, we could then see where the gaps are and whether it would be possible for the committee to undertake a short inquiry.

10.24 a.m.

Y Wybodaeth Ddiweddaraf am Ddeisebau Blaenorol: Parhad

Updates to Previous Petitions: Continuation

Christine Chapman: We will now continue with our updates to previous petitions and we are currently looking at petition P-03-200 on the Glamorganshire canal. This summary called for the creation of a Glamorganshire canal historical trail from Merthyr Tydfil to Cardiff bay. The petitioner has provided further information on the work that he has done to progress this issue and has asked for assistance on a number of key issues. Are there any comments on this? Are you happy to seek the Minister's views on the issues raised by the petitioner?

Andrew R.T. Davies: We could also ask Visit Wales what it thinks of the petitioner's views. It plays an important role in promoting tourism and our tourist assets. Perhaps we could look at a Members' research service brief about the funding aspect of it because there are various strands of funding, and Members and the petitioners may be unaware of some of them.

Christine Chapman: The next petition is P-03-204 on public accountability and consultation in higher education. The Minister has provided a substantial response to the petitioners' correspondence, which looks at the role of the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the student complaints system and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. It highlights that an independent review into higher education governance has been instigated. Would you be happy if we were to seek the petitioners' views on the ministerial letter and the higher education governance review?

Andrew R.T. Davies: Yes.

Bethan Jenkins: Do we have a timeline for that review?

Ms Stocks: We have already asked the Minister about the scope and the time frame in relation to another petition. Once we receive that information, we will cross reference it with this particular petition.

Christine Chapman: The next petition is P-03-220, to lower the speed limit on the A40 near Abergavenny, which calls for the speed limit to be reduced on the A40 between the Hardwicke roundabout and Plas Derwen way. The latest correspondence from the Deputy First Minister states that work is ongoing to prioritise the trunk road speed limit review exercise, which is scheduled to be completed by December 2014. The prioritisation

'will take account of overall collision rates, existing speed limits and the potential for lowering limits'.

Are you happy to wait to receive further information from the Deputy First Minister on the speed limit review?

Andrew R.T. Davies: Yes.

Christine Chapman: Next, we have two petitions: P-03-227, on the access road in Llanmaes, and P-03-252, opposing the RAF St Athan northern access road. Both petitions oppose the construction of the northern access road. One additionally opposes the building of the Tremains Farm housing estate for the proposed defence technical college at St Athan. The Deputy First Minister's correspondence states that he hopes that the final decision on the compulsory purchase order will be made before the summer recess. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Andrew R.T. Davies: There is a contradiction in the letter, which I am trying to find among all the papers, but I do not seem to be able to. However, he talks about having the inspector's report and being hopeful about making a decision, but he also talks about the strategic defence review that is going on and almost indicates that the strategic defence review could precede the inspector's decision. The strategic defence review is not due until the autumn at the earliest, but the Deputy First Minister indicates in his letter that we should get a response before the summer recess. We should try to get some clarity on that, because he has got them mixed up. It may be worthwhile to try to find out the date, as the summer recess is some six or seven weeks away. Is there a date and is it a question of holding off making the decision until the strategic defence review is completed?

Christine Chapman: Are you happy to seek clarification on that? I see that you are.

The next petition is P-03-240 on improvements to the A40 in Llanddewi Velfrey. This calls for improvements to the A40 and a reduction of the speed limit in Llanddewi Velfrey. The Deputy First Minister's response states that pavement improvement works will commence in September 2010 and that details of the speed limit review site prioritisation will be available in the summer.

The petitioners have sent us a copy of the letter sent to the Deputy First Minister in which they raise a number of issues. First, they welcome the pavement improvement work at Ivy Cottage, but state that they do not feel that it is enough and that other sections of the pavement need to be widened. They also express concerns that this work, which was originally scheduled for June, has been moved back to September. Secondly, they express concern that the speed-activated signs will not reduce speed, and call for the speed limit to be reduced to 30 miles per hour and that that speed limit is enforced. Third, they highlight that the primary concern is that residents, especially children, are protected from traffic while crossing the road and call for a safe crossing to be created. They are also concerned that the current economic climate may impact on delivery of the bypass. Do you have any thoughts on further actions on this one?

10.30 a.m.

Andrew R.T. Davies: It is almost like the A40 up at Abergavenny. There is the review, which we hope will be with us by the end of June; perhaps we could implore the Deputy First Minister to ensure that the outcomes of that review are with us by then, because it would be pertinent to discuss this before the summer recess.

Christine Chapman: Are you happy with that? I see that you are.

The next petition is P-03-262, calling for the National Assembly to investigate the practicalities of establishing a Welsh peace institute. The Frankfurt Peace Institute is unable to give oral evidence, but has offered to provide written responses to any questions. You have had in your papers an updated briefing from the Members' research service, providing more information as requested by the committee. The questions will be based on those drawn up for the cancelled oral evidence that was scheduled for 23 March. Are there any thoughts on what further action we need to take with this one?

Andrew R.T. Davies: Regrettably, because representatives of the Frankfurt institute were unable to come, the best we can get is written evidence from them, and we are grateful that they will take the time to do that for us. I presume that it would be pertinent to send the evidence that we have gathered to date to the First Minister, because ultimately it is his office that will determine whether the Government is interested in taking this on board or not.

Bethan Jenkins: Could I clarify whether we will be doing a short inquiry? Would that mean that we would be proposing actions points, or would we just be forwarding a piece of work that we have collated from evidence from various institutes?

Ms Stocks: What has been discussed previously, and highlighted the last time that we discussed this evidence, is that once we have had a response from the First Minister indicating how he feels in general terms, it might be that the committee would then want to take forward some sort of inquiry into this, which is one of the things that the petitioners are calling for, in terms of some sort of task and finish group.

Bethan Jenkins: So, it is a case of forwarding the evidence to the First Minister and seeing what he says.

Ms Stocks: Yes, and then making a decision about whether the committee wants to do a more in-depth piece of work on it.

Bethan Jenkins: Thank you for the clarification.

Christine Chapman: The next petition, P-03-264, calls on the National Assembly to help stop the alarming loss of wildlife and habitat. It calls for a full inquiry to be undertaken into why the 2010 biodiversity target will not be reached. Responses have been received from the Minister, providing further information on the review that has been started on this issue. We have had more information from the petitioners as to why they do not feel that this review is sufficient, and why they still wish to see a full public inquiry. The Members' research service has recently published a briefing assessing progress made towards meeting the target, and detailing reasons why key stakeholders, including the petitioners, feel that the target has not been met. There was a debate last week in Plenary when all parties called for strong action to be taken to halt the decline of biodiversity. Are there any thoughts on this one? Do you want to write to the Sustainability Committee to ask if it would be able to undertake an inquiry on this issue?

Jenny Randerson: I would support that because this is such a fundamental issue. The petitioners have written a well-argued letter explaining why there is more work to be done, and such an inquiry could be a very useful piece of work for the Sustainability Committee to undertake.

Christine Chapman: Is everyone happy with the suggestion that we should write to the Sustainability Committee?

Andrew R.T. Davies: Could I make a suggestion? When I was rather bored and looking at the internet the other night, I noticed that the Sustainability Committee had on its agenda a look at its forward work programme, and I think that it meets tomorrow. Perhaps an informal word from us might allow them to discuss that, given that we have only two-and-a-half terms left of this Assembly.

Christine Chapman: The next one, P-03-270, is an update on the Action for Children petition. We took evidence on this a fortnight ago. It calls for work-based learning provision to be improved, especially in relation to vulnerable young people. We asked the Members' research service to look at whether any inquiries have focused on this specific group of young people, and the research indicates that, while work has touched on this group, a specific focused piece of work has not been undertaken either in Wales or at Westminster. I know that the Enterprise and Learning Committee is undertaking an inquiry into young people who are not in employment, education, or training. Do you have any thoughts on further work that we may need to do on this?

Bethan Jenkins: The only point that I would like to raise relates to the process. Issues regarding Rathbone arose in the evidence session, and I believe that we agreed to contact it. However, I happened to speak to someone from Rathbone recently who did not know about this and found out about the issue from Action for Children. Perhaps we could speed up communication so that, if there is something quite sensitive that affects a company or an organisation, it does not have to hear about it through the grapevine or from other organisations. We need to inform the Enterprise and Learning Committee about this so that, when it scrutinises Rathbone in its inquiry, it will have a clear and informed idea of the background. I also think that we should write to the Children and Young People Committee to ask whether it has time to undertake an inquiry. If not, perhaps we can consider doing something on this committee.

Christine Chapman: I know that Rathbone is to give evidence to the Enterprise and Learning Committee on 10 June. I think that some things need to be clarified. Are you happy for us to write to the Children and Young People Committee? I see that you are.

Andrew R.T. Davies: I would be quite surprised if it had not done some work on this already, as it may have been looked at as part of another inquiry. It might be worth trying to find out, if it has undertaken an inquiry on it, what evidence it found that could complement this work. An inquiry is quite time consuming and I do not know whether it would have the time to do that as part of its forward work programme. However, if it has already looked at this, that work might complement the evidence that we have already taken and it might lighten their load if we could put together a piece of work that offers a solution to the clear problems that were identified when we took the oral evidence.

Christine Chapman: Again, this is about exploring where the gaps are. Okay, we will do that.

The next petitions are P-03-271 and P-03-286 and relate to business rates in Narberth and Ceredigion. These petitions seek an impact assessment of the increase in business rate valuations for businesses in Narberth and Ceredigion. We have had responses from petitioners from Narberth, who have raised further questions about the impact there. The Minister for Social Justice and Local Government has stated clearly that he has no plans to undertake an impact assessment. Are you happy that we seek further information from the Minister in relation to the multiplier, the external study of the effects of rate relief, and details of when the new business rate relief scheme will be announced?

Andrew R.T. Davies: The petitioners have given us a clear idea of what they are looking at. Perhaps the Minister could respond. It is his prerogative to do as he wishes, but perhaps he could respond to the petitioners' evidence.

Christine Chapman: The next petition is P-03-273 and relates to the transportation of wind turbines in mid Wales. The petition calls for guidance to be issued to planning authorities on the impact of windfarm developments, especially in relation to the transportation of components on roads in mid Wales. The Deputy First Minister has stated that a study is currently being undertaken and that he hopes for an agreed approach later this year. Are you happy to ask the Deputy First Minister to provide an update on this prior to the summer recess? I see that you are.

The next petition is P-03-276. This petition relates to motion for women and is from Sustrans. It calls for priority to be given to create environments that support and encourage cycling. The Deputy First Minister's response indicates that work is being carried out to promote cycling. The petitioners have indicated that they are encouraged by the correspondence from the Deputy First Minister, but want the Government to work more across departments to ensure delivery against targets in the walking and cycling action plan. Are you happy to seek further information from the Deputy First Minister on cycle training, cycle lanes and cross-departmental working? I see that you are.

The next petition is P-03-280 and relates to Cardiff Royal Infirmary. This seeks the re-opening and refurbishment of Cardiff Royal Infirmary to include an accident and emergency department and an intensive care unit. The ministerial response states that while there are no plans to locate an accident and emergency department at Cardiff Royal Infirmary, she has approved £3 million worth of funding towards its redevelopment. Does anyone have any thoughts on this one?

10.40 a.m.

Jenny Randerson: It would be very helpful to ask the Minister for more details on what exactly will go on the site of the CRI. I have been deeply involved in this issue, and I do not know what the latest plans are. So, it would be useful for the petitioner to ask for more detail. The Minister's letter is very clear, but it lacks some detail on that point.

Christine Chapman: Should we also write to Cardiff and Vale University Local Health Board?

Andrew R.T. Davies: Yes, because it is integral to this issue, and we should also seek the petitioners' views on the evidence that the Minister has provided to date.

Christine Chapman: Okay, good. The final update is on P-03-281, on more staff in accident and emergency departments. This calls for the Welsh Assembly Government

'to publish guidelines on staffing levels for Accident and Emergency departments.'

The Minister states that specific guidelines would not be appropriate as there are different ways in which to organise staff within accident and emergency departments. However, she says that accident and emergency departments should broadly follow the recommendations made in the College of Emergency Medicine's document, 'The Way Ahead 2008-2012'. Would you be happy to seek the petitioners' views on the ministerial response?

Bethan Jenkins: We also need to précis or do a short bullet point summary of 'The Way Ahead 2008-2012' document for the petitioners to see whether they think that it mirrors what they were asking for, or whether they think that it would not address their petition. We cannot expect all petitioners to read Government documents, so we should have an action point so that they can understand what the document means.

Andrew R.T. Davies: The Minister highlights how local health boards have a key role in determining local requirements in accident and emergency departments. Therefore, we should write to the seven local health boards to ask them to give us an overview of their accident and emergency staffing rosters, and their compliance with the 'The Way Ahead 2008-2012' document to which the Minister refers to get an understanding of how they are commissioning the service locally. The Minister is right to say that the LHBs have a role to play in weighing up what is important in their locality.

Bethan Jenkins: It is also about how they conform to the document, because I was a bit concerned with the Minister's comment that they 'should broadly be following'. It seems that that is only an indication that they could try to follow it. So, we should find out what health boards should be doing statutorily, or whether this is a guiding document. That could lead to more concern.

10.43 a.m.

Cynnig Trefniadol Procedural Motion

Christine Chapman: I move that

the committee resolves to exclude the public from the remainder of the meeting in accordance with Standing Order No. 10.37(vi).

I see that the committee is in agreement.

Derbyniwyd y cynnig.
Motion agreed.

"Daeth rhan gyhoeddus y cyfarfod i ben am 10.43 p.m.
The public part of the meeting ended at 10.43 p.m."