

Subject: Petition P-06-1338

Dear Jack Sargeant MS,

Firstly, I would like to thank the Petitions Committee and staff for considering this petition.

Our democratic institutions work best when all people are given the tools they need to highlight issues of importance to them, to influence decision makers and play an active role in how policy is formed, services delivered and change achieved. This is a point I will return to later in this response.

I also would like to thank the Deputy Minister for his response to the Petitions Committee Chair. I am grateful for the opportunity to provide my observations for the attention of the committee.

The Deputy Minister's response outlines the current position very well. Public transport was effectively shut down during the pandemic, with very few services running in order to provide transport for some key workers. Through 2020 and 2021, even when not in lockdown, the advice stressed to the public was to stay away from public transport.

As someone reliant on buses, I actively avoided buses for quite a while after the advice against buses ceased. Only when my son started school and it was necessary for me to once again get on the bus did I do so.

My point here is that despite being a thirty-something year old man in good health, I was reluctant to go back to buses due to the strength of the public health messaging. For those who have poorer health than me, it is not surprising that many of them continue to have concerns about the safety of buses. While I welcome the Deputy Minister's comment about a "back to bus" campaign, I would like to know why such a campaign is only now being discussed. After two years of telling people not to use the bus - why did no one in government think that the opposite message needed to be delivered in equally strong terms once things were safer?

In a matter of weeks services will be reduced - thankfully not to the extent originally feared when I started this petition - but with funding reductions due the network will be smaller. Cuts will still take place, services will be reduced or removed entirely. This will have an impact on people, an impact that could have been avoided.

For much of the last year there has been references in Senedd committees, Cross Party Groups, and in the Siambr (sometimes by the Deputy Minister and First Minister) that the lack of passenger number recovery was putting services at risk and putting a strain on public funds. There have also been, in recent years, a number of campaign weeks or months (*Catch the Bus Week/Catch the Bus Month*) that have provided opportunities for the Government to highlight the contribution that buses make and how important they are to our community wellbeing.

That's is why I put in my initial petition that we need a recovery plan, co-produced by those within the bus industry and passengers (and even passengers who have not yet returned), to assess the problem with numbers and work towards getting numbers back up. This was going to be a difficult task with the current level of service, but with funding cuts and a smaller, less comprehensive and convenient network, I fear this task is now even more challenging.

The Deputy Minister's response also refers to stakeholders that have been involved in discussions, and will be involved in designing the campaign. Going back to my point earlier about public involvement and influence, what role does the Deputy Minister have in mind for passengers? They are the most important stakeholder in this process but have been notably absent.

That is why I would appreciate the Committee, when considering this petition, do not think the matter is resolved simply because some funding will continue and a campaign will - at some point - begin.

We need funding guarantees and we need a plan that involves all stakeholders - especially bus users (regular passengers, not just the organisation Bus Users UK) - in order to address the long term managed decline of bus services in Wales.

Buses currently provide an essential service. They connect our communities and improve the health, wealth and wellbeing of our nation. The support the Welsh Government has shown in recent years should be recognised and applauded, so too should the references to public transport in the travel hierarchy and the ambitions of the *One Network – One Ticket* white paper, but there is a lot more work that needs to be done to build a sustainable, comprehensive network. With a legislative solution still years away from being realised, effort is needed now.

Buses cannot continue to be low down in priorities of politicians. As a bus user who has seen the dreadful impact loss of services can have on people, I ask for leadership and I ask for bus users to be included - we want to help. I ask the Petitions Committee to ask the following;

- What is the suggested timeline for a Back to Bus campaign?
- What are the key outcomes and targets of the campaign?
- How are bus passengers involved in the design and delivery of this campaign?
- What immediate guidance or materials can be given to bus operators, local authorities and members of the public to start promoting bus journeys right now?
- Will we see members of the Government use every available and appropriate opportunity to promote buses and highlight their safety?

Thank you once again for your consideration and for allowing me to provide this additional submission.

Kind regards
Andrew Jenkins