

## **BSWB 07 - Evidence from: Transport Focus**

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

**Pwyllgor Newid Hinsawdd, yr Amgylchedd a Seilwaith | Climate Change, Environment, and Infrastructure Committee**

**Bil Gwasanaethau Bysiau (Cymru) | Bus Services (Wales) Bill**

### **1. What are your views on the general principles of the Bill, and is there a need for legislation to deliver the stated policy intention?**

Transport Focus is the independent consumer watchdog promoting the interests of transport users. This submission is written to provide respond to Welsh Parliament's plans to franchise buses across Wales. This response should not be used to infer views of franchising plans or proposals in other areas.

This response will take particular focus on the following key themes;

1. Engagement with passengers to understand users' needs
2. Importance of qualitative monitoring on current and future services
3. Accountability of service delivery

Each of these themes will be referred to in more detail throughout the rest of this response.

From Transport Focus' perspective the key challenge is whether the proposals set out in the bill reflect the needs and priorities of both existing and potential passengers. The closer that the specifications and targets reflect people's needs, the better the chance that they will deliver the type of services that people want and value and will draw in new users to grow the market. How TfW and Welsh Government engages with users to understand their needs is key in this process.

## **2. What are your views on the Bill's provisions (set out according to Parts below), in particular are they workable and will they deliver the stated policy intention?**

### **▪ Part 1 - Key concepts and general objectives (sections 1 to 4)**

Transport Focus' research has shown that the key priorities for bus passengers are an affordable, frequent, and reliable bus service. The information provided within the bill does appear to target these priorities by allowing greater flexibility to TfW when specifying routes and times. This helps address 'gaps' in the network that impact on existing users and act as a barrier to new users. It would also seem to provide flexibility when it comes to providing a simplified and integrated fares and ticketing structure – another key passenger aspiration. Franchising the bus network in Wales could offer a more stable operating environment for operations whilst giving TfW control over network design and enabling more effective cross-subsidy of routes. The chief benefit of franchising in this regard would be the opportunity of setting a consistent set of standards across all routes and services. Franchising could also facilitate a more unified real-time passenger information service. Transport Focus would be interested to understand more about who and how these standards would be set and communicated to bus users across Wales (see below).

Franchising the bus network across Wales would in turn increase the risk on the Welsh Government as it would make the state responsible for fluctuations in user demand and cost inflation. We agree that franchising will give TfW more control over the design and implementation of the bus network, ensuring that the wider benefits from investment and enhancement target those who are likely to gain most.

Finally, Transport Focus welcomes the objective stated within the bill "to improve and grow the Bus Network across Wales." A more frequent bus service is something Transport Focus strongly supports. Within the bill there is insufficient clarity on the quality of the service provided and how satisfaction of passengers will be measured and improved. Passengers who receive a service they are satisfied with will likely use the bus service more frequently, in turn increasing passenger numbers and revenue. Our national passenger satisfaction survey, Your Bus Journey, provides independent qualitative data representing the independent passenger voice of bus users and their journey experience. Transport Focus would be happy to discuss how this could be used in future years to drive improvement across Welsh buses.

### **3. What are your views on the Bill's provisions (set out according to Parts below), in particular are they workable and will they deliver the stated policy intention?**

- Part 2 - Functions of the Welsh Ministers relating to local bus services (sections 5 to 20)**

The Welsh Bus Network Plan will be an important document. The contraction of the network in recent years will have contributed to the reduction in bus patronage in Wales. The Transport Focus Your Bus Journey survey 2024 results from Wales show passenger satisfaction with the frequency of bus services across Wales as a whole is low, at 58 per cent and as low as 53 per cent in South West Wales. The Plan provides an opportunity to start to address this issue. However, the survey also shows overall satisfaction with the bus journey across Wales is 84 per cent and is 88 per cent in Mid Wales, showing that when people have a bus service, it is a good service and is being valued. The Bill places a significant responsibility on Ministers, so we are pleased to see the duty to consult local authorities, corporate joint committees and, in particular organisations representing bus passengers on the Plan and any revisions to it (sections 6 and 8). We would be happy to advise TfW on how best to obtain input from users. The key to service improvement will be the contents of the local bus service contracts let by Ministers (section 9). We note that much of this content will be informed by Regulations (section 10) and that these Regulations may set out standards which will be required, including punctuality, reliability and safety; frequency and timing; routes and areas of operation; information to be displayed on vehicles; fares & ticketing; complaints handling and incentives. Passengers have a real interest in all these matters - we would like to see a commitment to consult users and their representatives when drawing up these Regulations, which would help to demonstrate the improved accountability to users from franchising. The Bill requires Ministers to publish a report on progress towards achieving the objectives set out in section 4 of the Bill (section 20). While we welcome this provision, we would like to see the Bill go further and require consultation with users. The legislation in England (Part 2 of the Transport Act 2000) requires franchising authorities to publish a plan explaining how they will consult users on how well their franchising scheme is working. We recommend that something similar is introduced in Wales. Our annual bus passenger satisfaction survey, Your Bus Journey, could provide important evidence for Ministers when preparing this report. Transport Focus would like to seek clarification on which body will be responsible for passenger relations within the new proposed system and for ongoing and

independent representation of the passenger voice. Engagement with passengers and passenger groups from an early stage to consult on passenger priorities and to understand their experience of using the service is very important. In addition, how will complaints handling be developed? For example: if a passenger has a complaint, who will this be sent to? Will complaints be dealt with in-house, if this is the case will there be an alternative dispute resolution body (e.g. an ombudsman)?

\*RESPONSE TO PART 2 WILL CONTINUE IN PART 3.

#### **4. What are your views on the Bill's provisions (set out according to Parts below), in particular are they workable and will they deliver the stated policy intention?**

- **Part 3 - Restriction on providing local bus services (sections 21 to 24)**

\*THE BELOW IS A CONTINUATION OF OUR RESPONSE TO PART 2. (Transport Focus has no comment on part 3).

Transport Focus would like to understand more on how Welsh Government will permit private operators the right to run in a franchised area. What criteria will be used to accept or reject applications presented to them?

Additionally, the Bill does not refer to the production of a passenger charter outlining what passengers should expect from their bus service and what to do if their expectations are not met. A charter provides accountability to passengers and can be a great marketing tool if properly publicised. Transport Focus would welcome the production of a passenger charter alongside the implementation of bus franchising. We have produced guidance on writing and promoting passenger charters and would be happy to advise TfW.

Finally, in recent years the role of the driver has become even more prominent. The challenge to retain and recruit drivers in some areas has been a significant challenge for the industry. In turn, shortages of drivers have been a significant challenge for the industry and impacted on the reliability of services for passengers. Our most recent research (Making great bus journeys – 2024) showed that the bus driver is the second most important ingredient in terms of delivering a great journey (after timeliness/ punctuality). In the Your Bus Journey survey 2024 results, passenger satisfaction with bus drivers was very good, scoring 88 per cent across Wales and 91 per cent in Mid Wales. Transport Focus would be interested to

understand what efforts will be made to ensure a high level of driver training and standards within the new plans.

Will this be left to operators running the franchise services or would TfW be involved in things like training specifications? Effective recruitment and retention of drivers will be essential to support effective service delivery. The bus driver must also consider the comfort and safety of diverse groups of passengers, who may have a variety of needs. While many passengers may have limited interaction with drivers, they do observe how drivers handle requests for such help from fellow passengers. The role of the driver is often under the microscope and noted by passengers. Our research shows differences in satisfaction levels for disabled passengers that for some is markedly lower. To improve this, there must be a focus on support and training for drivers, particularly for passengers with a seen or unseen disability.

## **5. What are your views on the Bill's provisions (set out according to Parts below), in particular are they workable and will they deliver the stated policy intention?**

- Part 4 - Information and data (sections 25 to 31)**

Transport Focus does welcome the wide-ranging data requirement that will be reported on and made available to the public (sections 27 and 28) although we note that the requirement relates to the information which passengers need to use local bus services, but not performance information.

Transparency with performance data allows bus users to gain a fuller understanding of the services that are being delivered to them. We would welcome a commitment in the Bill and in Regulations to publish information about performance. In particular, we would like to see the publication of patronage, punctuality, journey time and passenger satisfaction data, which would demonstrate improvements in accountability under franchising. Your Bus Journey (YBJ) provides ongoing measurement of passengers' interests, satisfaction and a journey experience snapshot across Wales. It may be a useful way to keep track on the trend of passengers' views and journey experiences.

On the subject of data transparency, will complaints processes and service quality be made public? This would likely increase levels of trust between bus providers and users. Additionally, would vehicle tracking also be available to users? Vehicle tracking on public apps has been a big technology step forwards to allow users with accurate information to provide consumers with confidence when their bus will arrive at their stop.

## **6. What are your views on the Bill's provisions (set out according to Parts below), in particular are they workable and will they deliver the stated policy intention?**

- Part 5 – Local authority powers and duties (sections 32 to 34)**

Transport Focus is encouraged to see that Local Authorities across Wales are included within the production of this bill and further plans to franchise buses across the Nation. Consultation should happen as close as possible to the area affected by the consultation. With this noted, Transport Focus would encourage future consultations to include engagement with users of Welsh buses, whether this is through user groups or direct consultation with passengers. This could be done through the use of an engagement strategy - TfW and Welsh Government setting out how they will engage with passengers and how they will use the information gathered going forwards.

This engagement could include:

- Engagement and consultation with passengers and non-users – especially on significant changes to routes and frequencies, or fares, ticketing and information. We were pleased to see the commitment to involving people in the design and delivery of bus services in the Wales Transport Strategy, as one of the five ways of working, but further clarity is needed on how this would be implemented under these proposals.
- Measuring passenger satisfaction and making corresponding improvements to services. The best judge of how well services are being provided is the people using those services. Implementing standards and targets for passenger satisfaction will help create an environment of continuous improvement.
- Setting out passengers' rights to standards of service, with effective mechanisms for redress.
- Making performance information available to passengers. Publishing this information is regarded as right in principle and is good for trust because 'it helps keeps the industry honest.' This is the case even if individuals have little personal appetite in seeking it out – the fact that others are looking at it can often be enough.

- A good complaint handling system.

Building in such engagement from the beginning would help to improve the relationship between passengers and operators. Trust has both a rational and an emotional element. At the rational level it means running the buses on time, being dependable, coping with disruption, resolving problems and offering value for money. Service delivery (in other words delivering the essentials) is at the heart of this rational element. The better the operator runs the service, the higher the levels of trust generated. Being unreliable or inconsistent has a large detrimental impact on levels of trust.

However, it is the more emotionally engaging factors that build real affinity. This includes things like staff going the extra mile, and feeling like the service provider really does care what happens to you – as evidenced by interacting with passengers and involving them in the decision-making process. Passengers feel that more should be done to consult them and their representatives. It also means operators communicating well, especially during disruption. The ‘radio silence’ approach leaves passengers unable to assess the alternatives, update work/family on amended arrival times and not feeling in control of the situation.

## **7. What are your views on the Bill’s provisions (set out according to Parts below), in particular are they workable and will they deliver the stated policy intention?**

- **Part 6 – Miscellaneous and general (sections 35 to 44)**

Transport Focus has no comment on this question.

## **8. What are the potential barriers to the implementation of the Bill’s provisions and how does the Bill take account of them?**

One aspect of the bill that Transport Focus would seek clarification on is how cost will be factored into the planning and production of the franchising scheme. The success of franchising will likely depend on a continuing commitment to a high level of public funding, particularly given the long-term trend of patronage reduction. Will bus services be planned on the basis of how much money is available to spend? Or, will a first principles lens be used, with calculations on what an ideal service delivery would look like, planning service delivery from this perspective? What will be the roles of fflecsi services and community transport in connecting services and journey opportunities across the network?

Another potential barrier for implementation could be how network infrastructure (buses, depots etc) will be packaged up to deliver services across Wales. If some of the existing operators across Wales are not transferred into the franchising scheme, then what will become of their infrastructure and local expertise of service delivery?

## **9. How appropriate are the powers in the Bill for Welsh Ministers to make subordinate legislation (as set out in Chapter 5 of Part 1 of the Explanatory Memorandum)**

Transport Focus has no comment on this question.

## **10. Are any unintended consequences likely to arise from the Bill?**

One potential concern of the proposals is the uncertainty of negotiating the transfer of depots and vehicles from bus companies. What measures are in place to ensure that services continue during the transition to franchising? We are concerned about the risk of network disruption during transition to franchised operations and the impact this may have on passengers. Careful consideration should be given to this when planning the next stages and potential implementation of the bill. Also, to ensuring the bar is not set too high in future to deter the many small and medium-sized operations that currently provide services to passengers across Wales.

Additionally, will there be reassurances to bus passengers that the transition to bus franchising will not lead to a reduction of service or penalise passengers, especially those passengers currently receiving discounted or free bus services?

## **11. What are your views on the Welsh Government's assessment of the financial implications of the Bill as set out in Part 2 of the Explanatory Memorandum?**

Transport Focus has no comment on this question.

**12. Are there any other issues that you would like to raise about the Bill and the accompanying Explanatory Memorandum or any related matters?**

Finally, who would be responsible for producing Equality Impact Assessments, for ensuring compliance with disability regulations on such things as vehicle and passenger information designs, and on general efforts to make travel more accessible? We would also emphasise the importance (and the value) of engaging directly with people with a lived experience of disability. Where changes are being considered then it will be essential that disabled people have the opportunity to influence those decisions through public consultations, focus groups or other means.