

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru	National Assembly for Wales
Y Pwyllgor Menter a Busnes	Enterprise and Business Committee
Gwasanaethau Bysiau a Thrafnidiaeth Gymunedol yng Nghymru	Bus and Community Transport Services in Wales
BCT 28	BCT 28
Age Cymru	Age Cymru



## Evidence paper

### Inquiry into Bus and Community Transport Services in Wales

**Enterprise and Business Committee  
National Assembly for Wales**

**October 2015**

#### **Introduction**

Age Cymru is the leading national charity working to improve the lives of all older people in Wales. We believe older people should be able to lead healthy and fulfilled lives, have adequate income, access to high quality services and the opportunity to shape their own future. We seek to provide a strong voice for all older people in Wales and to raise awareness of the issues of importance to them.

We are pleased to respond to the Enterprise and Business Committee of the National Assembly for Wales' call for evidence into Bus and Community Transport Services in Wales. We have commented on those areas we believe are of significant relevance to older people in Wales.

Our response includes findings from a research study into older people's experiences of bus services in Wales. This research was carried out in 2013 by the Bevan Foundation on behalf of Age Cymru, and is based on the experiences of more than 300 older people.

#### **Consultation questions**

##### **Question 1 – How would you describe the current condition of the bus and community transport sectors in Wales?**

We are extremely concerned that local bus services remain vulnerable to spending cuts or commercial decisions by operators. According to a recent report by the

Campaign for Better Transport, there have been 70 cuts or alterations to bus services and 16 services withdrawn in Wales in the last year.<sup>1</sup>

There is a danger that reductions in bus services mean that access to a whole range of services can become impossible for some older people. Many older people rely on buses to get out and about;<sup>2</sup> 48% of pensioner households do not have access to a car compared to 26% of all households.<sup>3</sup>

Given that the Community Transport Association 'State of the Nation report (2014)'<sup>4</sup> 'reflects a time of uncertainty for the CT sector, partly in the way transport is funded in Wales for 2014/15 but also due to the ongoing challenges faced by the CT sector given wider economic pressures', we would be very concerned that reductions in CT services would mean that access to vital services can become impossible for those older people that are reliant on CT services. Community transport (CT) can play a crucial role in helping older people to access essential services by providing travel where public transport cannot or does not, and on a door-to-door basis for people with specific mobility needs. CT can provide transport for older people who are unable to use public transport services due to their location or mobility, and do not have access to alternatives such as their own vehicle or are unable to afford taxi fares.

## **Question 2 – why do you think the number of bus services and the number of bus passengers is declining in Wales?**

We believe that cuts in funding taken by the Welsh Government and local government in Wales - such as funding for the concessionary travel scheme for older and disabled people (which, according to a recent report by Campaign for Better Transport,<sup>5</sup> the Welsh Government has cut £5.45m since 2013) - have had an impact on the number of services available, with further consequences in terms of passenger numbers.

Cuts in bus services are ultimately commercial decisions taken by private bus companies based on commercial viability, but these are inevitably strongly influenced by public funding and government policies.

We welcome the continued commitment by the Welsh Government in maintaining free travel on local bus services for older and disabled people. This scheme is an indispensable part of the lives of many older people,<sup>6</sup> providing a vital connection to services and amenities. Research has also found that it is invaluable in helping older

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<sup>1</sup> Campaign for Better Transport (2015) Buses in crisis. A report on bus funding across England and Wales 2010-2015.

<sup>2</sup> Age Cymru (2013) Buses – a lifeline for older people. Older people's experience of bus services in Wales. A report by the Bevan Foundation for Age Cymru.

<sup>3</sup> Welsh Government (2015) National Transport Plan 2015 – Draft. Equality Impact Assessment – Part 1 and Part 2.

<sup>4</sup> CTA (2014) A CTA State of the Sector Report. Wales 2014. CTA Cymru Wales. Community Transport Association.

<sup>5</sup> Campaign for Better Transport (2015) Buses in crisis. A report on bus funding across England and Wales 2010-2015.

<sup>6</sup> Older People's Commissioner for Wales (2014) The Importance and Impact of Community Services within Wales.

people in Wales to retain their independence and remain active.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the scheme has directly supported the sustainability of a number of bus routes, which would not be commercially viable without the income it provides. We believe it is essential that this scheme is protected. This must include consideration of the rate of the reimbursement for service operators or there is a danger that socially important routes that do not make a profit will be lost.

### **Question 3 – what do you think is the social, economic and environmental impact of recent changes in bus and community transport service levels?**

Bus and community transport services are vitally important in helping older people to maintain independence and well-being. They can ensure that communities, services, facilities and amenities are accessible to older people.

In terms of social impact, we believe that fewer bus and community transport services would lead to an increased risk that isolation and loneliness will impact upon older people's well-being. It is essential that older people in all areas have the means to get out to buy food, get medical attention, get money and pay bills, and have social contact. These are basic features of a decent life and ought to be a high priority in transport policy.

There is a danger that reductions in bus services mean that access to a whole range of services can become impossible for some older people. Access to essential services is crucial for older people. One of the key findings of our research<sup>8</sup> was that getting to and from hospital is a major problem for many older people, the heaviest users of secondary care services, even in urban areas. The reconfiguration of health services across Wales is likely to lead to additional transport challenges for some older people. If specialist services are further away and there is an expectation that people will have to travel, it is vitally important that transport links are given due consideration.

### **Question 4 – what do you think the Welsh Government should do to support bus and community transport in Wales?**

We reiterate our response to Question 2 (above) regarding the free bus travel scheme for older and disabled people. Given its importance to older people, the Welsh Government must continue to support this travel scheme for all older and disabled people. This must include consideration of the rate of the reimbursement for service operators or there is a danger that socially important routes that do not make a profit will be lost.

As quoted above, there have been 70 cuts or alterations to bus services and 16 services withdrawn in Wales in the last year.<sup>9</sup> Given that one of the key priorities of the Welsh Government's draft National Transport Plan is 'Access to services', and

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<sup>7</sup> Older People's Commissioner for Wales (2010) Concessionary Bus Pass Research.

<sup>8</sup> Age Cymru (2013) Buses – a lifeline for older people. Older people's experience of bus services in Wales.

<sup>9</sup> Campaign for Better Transport (2015) Buses in crisis. A report on bus funding across England and Wales 2010-2015.

that the draft Plan's Equality Impact Assessment<sup>10</sup> identifies that '48% of pensioner households do not have access to a car', we believe that the Welsh Government must monitor and respond to cuts and changes to bus services, with particular reference to the ability of older people to access key services.

We welcome the Welsh Government's intention in their draft National Transport Plan to 'provide funding to support socially necessary services'. Our research<sup>11</sup> highlighted significant concerns about the poor frequency of daytime services in rural areas, and services in the evenings and Sundays in all areas.

We believe that the Welsh Government, local authorities and health boards across Wales must seek to develop effective, co-ordinated transport links in light of the reconfiguration of health services across Wales, to enable older people to access these vital services.

We welcome the recommendations of the Bus Policy Advisory Group that network partnerships should be established comprising local authorities, bus operators, bus users and key trip generators including health care providers to review and develop services, and that the co-ordination of health related transport with commercial and subsidised services should be encouraged.<sup>12</sup>

We welcome the Welsh Government's intention in their draft National Transport Plan to 'develop options for targeted funding for bus and community transport services focused on rural services, access to hospital and other key services and access to employment sites'. We believe this should be a priority for the Welsh Government given the serious impact that a lack of access to key services can have.

The Welsh Government reduced the minimum threshold to be allocated to Community Transport (CT) to 5% of the Bus Services Support Grant (BSSG) which is allocated directly to local authorities, although its guidance recommends a target of 10%.<sup>13</sup> This policy change should be kept under review as we are concerned that it may have a negative impact on the sustainability of some services.

CT operators cannot claim funding under the Welsh Government's free bus travel scheme, and most CT schemes involve charging. There is an anomaly, therefore, whereby people entitled to free bus travel in Wales are charged for using community transport; we believe that this should be addressed for the future by the Welsh Government.

### **Question 5 – what do you think Welsh local authorities should do to support bus and community transport services?**

Many local authorities are responsible for the provision of bus stations, bus shelters and for passenger information, and we believe that improvements are needed in

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<sup>10</sup> Welsh Government (2015) National Transport Plan 2015 – Draft. Equality Impact Assessment – Part 1 and Part 2.

<sup>11</sup> Age Cymru (2013) Buses – a lifeline for older people. Older people's experience of bus services in Wales.

<sup>12</sup> Bus Policy Advisory Group (2014) Report of the Bus Policy Advisory Group. 24<sup>th</sup> June 2014 report.

<sup>13</sup> CTA (2014) A CTA State of the Sector Report. Wales 2014. CTA Cymru Wales. Community Transport Association.

these areas, in terms of improved infrastructure at bus stops such as seating, shelter and lighting, and accessible information about bus services.

For older people with limited mobility, getting to the bus stop is a significant issue, compounded by a lack of facilities at bus stops. Some older people are able to walk short distances and stand for short periods only, so more bus stops and shelters with seating would help to make public transport more accessible. Age Cymru research<sup>14</sup> highlighted concerns over the absence of seating at bus stops, and that many rural bus stops have no effective shelter from adverse weather.

We welcome the Welsh Government's intention regarding the 'Bus Stop Improvement Programme'<sup>15</sup> which proposes to upgrade 10% of shelter stock on key corridors in South East Wales in terms of the provision of improved waiting facilities to assist all passengers, particularly those with reduced mobility.<sup>16</sup> We believe that this programme should be extended to other areas of Wales.

It is essential that older people can easily access information about public transport services. Our research study<sup>17</sup> highlighted that accessing information about bus services, especially when several operators provide services on the same route, can be very difficult. Lack of information was mentioned as a reason why some older people did not use the bus.

Our research also highlighted problems with the readability of timetable information for anyone with slight eyesight impairments. We believe that the provision of information about bus services should be accessible in various formats; many older people are not able to use, or do not have access to the internet, and therefore may not be able to access such information if it is provided online only. Services provided online need to be high quality and easy to use, whilst offline services should be of equal quality and fully accessible.

The Bus Policy Advisory Group reported that a lack of or incorrect information is one of the most common complaints made by bus users. They highlighted that passengers need simple, easy to understand information, available in multiple formats including various digital platforms as well as paper and telephone. We welcome their recommendation that an information task force be established to improve the availability of information.<sup>18</sup>

## **Question 6 & 7**

**Q6 - what do you think about proposals to devolve bus registration powers to Wales? How should these be used?**

**Q7 - please tell us whether you think further powers to regulate the bus industry in Wales are required and why?**

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<sup>14</sup> Age Cymru (2013) Buses – a lifeline for older people. Older people's experience of bus services in Wales.

<sup>15</sup> Welsh Government (2015) National Transport Plan 2015 – Draft. Consultation Document.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Age Cymru (2013) Buses – a lifeline for older people. Older people's experience of bus services in Wales.

<sup>18</sup> Bus Policy Advisory Group (2014) Report of the Bus Policy Advisory Group. 24<sup>th</sup> June 2014 report.

Age Cymru would support proposals to regulate the bus industry in Wales (in respect of bus service registration) as this would complement existing devolved powers over transport policy.

We would hope that further powers to regulate the bus industry in Wales would lead to better integration of bus services with other forms of transport including rail and community transport.

### **Question 8 – what other action can be taken to ensure that bus and community transport services meet the needs of people in Wales?**

Findings from our research<sup>19</sup> confirm that older people who do use the bus are generally satisfied with the service they receive. Improvements that older people would most welcome concerned greater frequency, during the day in rural areas and in the evenings and on Sundays across the board. They also identified the routes served by buses and the proximity of bus stops to destinations as barriers to bus use, as well as reliability of services and a variety of other issues such as lack of information and poor facilities. Issues associated with disability cut across these areas.

Frequency: the main concerns were regarding services that were less than hourly, or which were very irregular, as these could force older people to spend longer at their destination than they would like and meant very long waits if a service was delayed or cancelled. Evening, Bank Holiday and Sunday services were a particular concern. In some cases there was no service at all; this was particularly the case in rural areas.

Routes and destinations: It was suggested that bus services would be better if they served a wider range of destinations or had routes that went closer to certain destinations. Some said destinations required a change of bus, often with poor connections between them. Related to this, some respondents pointed out that the routes of some buses did not go close either to people's homes or to their ultimate destination, meaning that some people are more than 20 minutes walk away from the bus stop. This was felt to be too far, especially for anyone with even a minor mobility impairment or with heavy shopping.

Others described how buses stop at the edge of facilities such as supermarkets and hospitals rather than going right to the entrance. It was pointed out how many new developments, including public services, were situated in places that had limited public transport services, or where the bus stop was some distance away or across a busy road or down a steep hill from the service in question.

Reliability: A number of older people identified reliability as a key issue for them. While they appreciated that sometimes buses were held up in traffic, they were less forgiving of buses that broke down or simply failed to turn up. The impact of poor reliability is made worse by the lack of information at the vast majority of bus stops,

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<sup>19</sup> Age Cymru (2013) Buses – a lifeline for older people. Older people's experience of bus services in Wales.

and the way the very poor facilities for those waiting e.g. the absence of seats or effective shelter from bad weather.

Disability and impairment issues: Cutting across the issues of frequency, routes and reliability is the issue of disability. It was clear that disability or impairment affected the bus use of some older people. Some said their ill health or impairment meant they could not use the bus at all. When disabled older people did attempt to travel, they faced multiple difficulties from accessing the bus itself to getting to and from the bus stop and to getting information about services. A number said that buses were not always fully accessible and that they needed help to use them.

We hope these comments are useful and would be happy to provide further information if required.