

Response from Bus Users UK to the North Wales Transport Commission Progress Statement 2023

1. Does our understanding of the transport system in Wales correspond with your experience?

Bus Users UK welcomes the progress statement which succinctly outlines the challenges and opportunities to address transport issues in North Wales.

The existing bus network works reasonably well across the coastal areas of North Wales but in many, particularly more rural areas, the service either does not exist or fails to provide a realistic alternative to travel by private car. Bus stop infrastructure is poor and inaccessible and where timetables are provided, they are often out-of-date, showing timetables that are pre-Covid.

We strongly support your conclusion that public transport use will not increase while infrastructure and services fail to meet the needs of communities. There is a need for more profound and progressive change if we are to achieve a sustainable integrated, multimodal transport system.

2. What do you consider the main transport issues and opportunities in your area?

There is a high level of car ownership and a lack of sufficient, sustainable public transport alternative options, particularly during evenings and Sundays. The pandemic has transformed commuting habits and the mix of office and home working means a flexible approach is now needed. Ticketing options need to be flexible and multimodal so that regular passengers can get good value tickets, however often they travel. It is also important that those without access to contactless bank cards, a smartphone or the internet are not excluded and have options to access the best value tickets and up-to-date travel information.

Opportunities exist, but it is essential that communities are part of the decision-making process to determine which services and frequencies are required to meet their needs and what will encourage them to switch from the car to more sustainable forms of transport. Passengers need bus services that are affordable, accessible, reliable and punctual.

A number of reports highlight the importance of public transport to communities and show that people are willing to change their transport habits if other options are available.

The National Federation of Women's Institutes published 'A New Route for Bus Services' report in 2021 which looked at people's experiences of using local buses and the impact of cuts to bus services:

- 52% in Wales said their bus service had reduced with 9% saying it had ceased all together
- 55% said they would use the bus more if they could access a frequent, reliable service
- 60% would use the bus more if timetables met their travel needs
- 33% did not use the bus due to the lack of services.

In 'Making the Connection', Sustrans Cymru reported that 23% of the population of Wales does not have access to a car. In view of the present cost-of-living crisis this makes it crucial that communities

are able to access affordable and reliable public transport. The report goes on to say that since 2010, bus vehicle numbers have reduced by 17.8% and that 12% of people do not have access to any public transport in their local area. The issue of transport poverty in Wales continues to impact on the lives of many, leading to social isolation and loneliness.

In its 2020 report 'Accessible Public Transport for Older People', the Equalities and Human Rights Commission commented: "Older and disabled people told us that they found the public transport system in Wales largely inaccessible. They faced a broad range of barriers to travel within a system that did not conform to the social model of disability or support their independence. Consequently, they felt their opportunities had been limited and that they had been left behind."

3. What do you consider most important in enabling a better transport system in the region?

We would like to see more consultation with, and the involvement of, users and non-users at grassroots level to understand their travel needs and aspirations so that any plans developed meet the needs of local communities.

It is important that procedures are put in place to ensure meaningful consultation occurs including face-to-face and online events to avoid digital exclusion. We are happy to offer our assistance in gathering this feedback.

In the 2020 EHRC report 'Accessible Public Transport for Older and Disabled People in Wales' it was noted that: "There was a lack of engagement with representatives for or with older and disabled people, who are experts by experience, in the development of strategies and policies. Engagement is required to align with legislation and conventions such as The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015) and UNCRPD Article 4.3. Where engagement was evident, there was no clear demonstration of how it had informed the equality impact assessment, or equality considerations in the strategy overall.

4. What type of interventions do you think would be most beneficial to the region?

The recent roads review sends a clear message that building more roads to tackle congestion is not the answer. Private cars have dominated our town centres for too long, creating congestion and pollution. To encourage people to switch to more sustainable and active travel choices, we need to review how these spaces are used and accessed, with priority given equitably to buses, car share schemes, pedestrians and cyclists. For example, there are locations such as Abergele Hospital which could be accessed by bus from the very well served town, and then on foot. However the road has no pedestrian space, tall hedges and an S bend where the national speed limit applies. Such roads could either be given a footway or narrowed for contraflow traffic to provide space for a footway.

The progress statement touches on road user charging and workplace parking levies. Whilst these may be seen as politically challenging to implement, Nottingham has successfully introduced workplace parking levies with the funds raised used to support public transport services.

5. What would you like to see as a result of the Committee's recommendations to Welsh Government?

Bus Users UK welcomes the long-term vision and objectives detailed in the White Paper to dramatically improve bus services in Wales and deliver a bus system that boosts social equity. We welcome recognition that these measures need to be accompanied by significant investment and

funding, both capital and revenue, and be supplemented by measures to tackle congestion and provide priority measures for bus services

We are particularly concerned about the funding requirement that a franchising network will require and whether this will be available or sustainable in the longer-term. We live in a climate in which we are encouraged to do more with less. As settlements from Westminster to Welsh Government have become tighter, so the pot of funding available to local authorities has reduced, requiring cuts to the services they provide in order to maintain their statutory services provision. A number of local authorities have cut their revenue support for bus services and in some cases have removed it entirely. Indeed we now stand on the precipice of Welsh Government support for services coming to an end on 30th June with further cuts to services predicted. The impact on individuals and communities will be devastating, as will the inevitable increase in social isolation with all the attendant costs.

The London model of franchising is often used as an exemplar of bus service provision, but there are significant differences to bus services in Wales. Buses are far more efficient in servicing areas of high population density and there is a greater density of population in London than in Wales. It should also be noted that ridership in London has fallen steadily since 2014 and TfL required significant funding to continue operating throughout the pandemic. TfL recently consulted on a large number of cuts to bus services so this model is certainly no panacea.

About Bus Users

Bus Users UK is a charity that campaigns for inclusive, accessible transport. We are the only approved Alternative Dispute Resolution Body for the bus and coach industry and the designated body for handling complaints under the Passenger Rights in Bus and Coach Legislation. We are also part of the Sustainable Transport Alliance, a group working to promote the benefits of public, shared and active travel.

Alongside our complaints work we investigate and monitor services and work with operators and transport providers to improve services for everyone. We run events, carry out research, respond to consultations, speak at government select committees and take part in industry events to make sure the voice of the passenger is heard.

Bus Users UK Charitable Trust Ltd is a registered charity (1178677 and SC049144) and a Company Limited by Guarantee (04635458).

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