

Response from Bus Users UK to the Neath Port Talbot Consultation

15 January 2024

We propose to give highest priority (priority level 1) to bus routes and service options which:

- Provide transport for learners going to school or college
- Provide access to health services
- Run in areas where there is no alternative transport
- Provide transport to work

Do you agree that these are the most important issues to consider when prioritising funding for bus services?

Strongly agree

If you would like to explain your answer, please use the space below:

It is difficult to prioritise funding for bus services as any cut to services will have consequences for users for whom bus services are quite literally their lifeline. Approximately 75% of public transport journeys in Wales are undertaken by bus and this mode has great potential to provide sustainable travel options given the right operating environment. At events we facilitate across Wales and indeed, events we have facilitated in Neath and Port Talbot, people highlight travel to and from work, places of education, healthcare facilities, shopping and leisure facilities as their main reason for using bus services.

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 that their bus service had reduced with 9% saying it had ceased altogether.
- 55% said that they would use the bus more if they could access a frequent, reliable service.
- 60% said they would use the bus more if timetables met their travel needs.
- 33% said they didn't use the bus due to the lack of services.

We propose to give Level 2 Priority to the routes and service options which:

- Provide a strategic transport link
- Provide multiple peak time journeys
- Provide a demand responsive transport service (Dial-a-Ride services)
- Have a high percentage of passengers who have concessionary passes

Do you agree that these are the other issues that we should consider when prioritising funding for bus services?

Strongly Agree

If you would like to explain your answer, please use the space below:

Many of these priorities listed ensure that options are available for travel to and from work, places of education, healthcare facilities, shopping and leisure facilities. At our events, people tell us that the bus is their lifeline, and they are lost without it. They are an integral part of the community and for many who do not drive or own a car, they are the only transport option.

In 'Making the Connection', Sustrans Cymru reported in 2022 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 the lives of many, leading to social isolation and loneliness and all the associated costs.

Are there any other factors that you think we should consider when prioritising funding for bus services in Neath Port Talbot?

We are pleased to see Neath Port Talbot CBC consult on its priorities for funding bus services in the event that the cost of the services exceeds the funding available. We are not aware of any other local authority doing this. However, we do have a concern that the consultation only appears to be online and is therefore not accessible to those who are digitally excluded. We would be pleased to partner with Neath Port Talbot CBC to organise a consultation event where passengers who are digitally excluded can make their opinions known.

Do you have any other comments about local bus services in Neath Port Talbot?

Covid has had a devastating effect on bus services. The negative messaging discouraging people from using bus services has been difficult to reverse, particularly with concessionary passholders who have not returned to bus at pre Covid levels. We find ourselves in a situation where bus operators are in a fragile state requiring ongoing funding to support services whilst in the midst of a cost of living crisis with reduced budgets. Added to this we are in the process of transitioning over the next few years to a franchising regime and all the costs and uncertainties that entails.

Whilst we appreciate that there are numerous difficult decisions for Neath Port Talbot Council to make for the next financial year, bus services cuts whilst seeming an easy decision to make have devastating impacts on those affected, particularly older and disabled people. It is unfortunate that bus services are usually seen as a cost rather than an investment in the communities they serve. Very often the cost saved in cutting a bus service is outweighed by the resulting costs in dealing with issues arising from these cuts such as loneliness and social isolation.

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."

We would urge Neath Port Talbot council to do all it can to protect bus services in order that they can continue to connect communities.

Would the way that we propose to prioritise funding for bus services have an impact on you and/or your family because of:

Age/Disability/Gender Reassignment/Marriage or Civil Partnership/Pregnancy or maternity/Race/Religion or belief/Sex/Sexual orientation?

This is a difficult question to answer until proposals are provided detailing any cuts to bus services. It is important to recognise that any cuts to bus services impact communities, especially those with protected characteristics under the Equalities Act. We would suggest that an equalities impact assessment is carried out in respect of any planned cuts to services. Deeper cuts lead to more congestion on the remaining services which tends to disproportionately affect people with disabilities.

Welsh Language Impact

What effect do you think the way that we propose to make decisions about which bus routes and options to fund will have on people's opportunities to use the Welsh language

No effect

Please give the reason(s) for your response:

The requirements of the Welsh language Act means that you cannot treat the Welsh language any less favourably than the English language. This consultation is available in Welsh, and presumably the outcomes will be written in Welsh and English. We do not see how any decisions that Neath Port Talbot CBC make about the provision of bus services will be affected by people's opportunity to respond in Welsh. Each response will be considered on its merits.

About Bus Users UK

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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