



**Community
Transport
Association**

Improving Local Bus Services in Wales

A Response from CTA

Introduction

In all parts of the UK, on every day of the year - including Christmas Day – thousands of community transport staff and volunteers are helping people to stay independent, participate in their communities and to access vital services and employment.

Community transport is about providing flexible and accessible community-led solutions in response to unmet local transport needs, and often represents the only means of transport for many vulnerable and isolated people. Significant user groups are older people and disabled people with a majority of services and projects working in rural areas.

Using everything from minibuses to mopeds, typical services include voluntary car schemes, community bus services, school transport, hospital transport, dial-a-ride, wheels to work and group hire services. Most services are demand-responsive, taking people from door to door, but a growing number are offering scheduled services along fixed routes where conventional bus services are not available.

As community transport works to a different business model from commercial passenger transport services, it is always run for a social purpose and community benefit, but never for a profit - it often a more reliable and resilient way of ensuring a broader range of transport needs can be met.

The Community Transport Association is the national body working with the providers of community transport, helping them to remain relevant and responsive to key areas of public policy and make a big difference for people and families in the communities where they work.

In Wales, community transport operators provide trips to many socially isolated individuals. Their services make a huge difference to the lives of people who are often unable to access other forms of transport and therefore would otherwise be unable to get to where they need to be. In compiling our response we have surveyed members across Wales to gather their views, to ensure that their lived experience is at the heart of this work.

Our survey shows our members are working with some of the most isolated individuals in Wales, and need any new bus settlement to better support the sustainability and viability of services operated by community transport operators in Wales. Although community transport is flexible, our members felt it was important that the Welsh Government cherish its specific values that differentiate it from the commercial network.

To achieve the most effective response we have focussed specifically on the areas within this consultation which relate to community transport. In particular, our response addresses questions: one, three, four, six, seven, eight, nine, and ten.

Planning Local Services

Of particular interest to community transport operators, the consultations asks respondents to consider the arrangements that local authorities should put in place to; ensure there is sufficient demand responsive and scheduled services, provide subsidies for travel, and consider the role of local authorities in promoting quality services.

Local authorities should have statutory obligations to consult the local community in the design of all new services, partnerships, and franchises. This must go beyond talking to bus operators and their passengers and involve charities and community groups that provide or support people to access transport. This dialogue is particularly important where community transport operators are asked to provide new services where other providers have dropped out of the market.

Reforming bus services should not just be about large buses but consider how demand responsive services built from the ground up can be part of a more joined-up transport network. The Welsh Government should make explicit considerations of the plurality of providers, and ensure the best use is made of a variety of modes of transport. Members also told us that they believe more should be done to make routes 'community focussed,' which would mean making greater considerations of the ease by which passengers can transition between different modes of transport.

Bus subsidies should be prioritised for supporting organisations that alleviate acute social isolation and to incentivise the creation of services in areas that are poorly served by conventional passenger transport services.

The Welsh Government should implement a 'Total Transport'¹ approach to look at how publicly commissioned transport services could be more integrated and collaborative. This would involve establishing how public policy divides could be crossed to integrate services, budgets, and expertise, across transport provision within health, education, and local authority transport. Members told us that community transport should be funded to pilot innovative ideas to integrate health and care services with other activities aimed at targeting isolation and mental health. In this light, we would support a 'Total Transport' scheme designed to achieve these aims.

Prior to the withdrawal of a registered service, an operator should have to provide data and support to community representatives within a much longer notice period to enable them to develop a proposal to run the service themselves.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/76-million-for-local-transport-in-rural-and-isolated-areas>

Fundamentally, there is a symbiotic relationship between community transport operators and local authorities which depends on positive relationships. **The Welsh Government should ensure the mechanisms are in place that enables community transport to be a strong partner in the debate with local authorities on what local services should look like.** In turn, this will help the Welsh Government develop community based solutions to the pressing transport challenges of our time, including greening our public vehicles, and developing more dementia friendly travel options.

Partnerships and Strategic Investment

The consultation explores the possibility of introducing new legislation to drive up bus standards through partnerships, franchises, and other methods. We believe that any direct intervention in the bus network through any form of reregulation, or redistribution of state funding, should be done with a view to increase the accessibility of the bus network.

This has to be much more than a conversation about community transport running alternatives when commercial or subsidised buses aren't available or accessible. It has to be about how community transport can improve connectivity to our rail network, open up public services and trying to improve access to our bus networks. Members told us that the rurality of their services makes generating capital for new services and vehicles difficult. This issue is accentuated when the cost of providing transport in rural areas is often higher than the cost of providing transport in urban areas. **In order for individuals who live in these rural communities to be able to access vital services it is important community transport operators are appropriately funded. This could be through capital investment in vehicles (including cars as well as minibuses,) or through support from local authorities through subsidies to cover ongoing costs.**

The success of partnerships and franchises should be judged by how many additional passengers are able to access the bus network. We would encourage the Welsh Government to consider how targeted investment could encourage community transport operators to undertake new services in areas poorly served by the commercial network.

Too often community transport is asked to provide a service as a last resort, once everyone else has had a go and proved they cannot make it work. **When designing franchises, local authorities should have to consider the role of the community transport and the voluntary sector from the outset.** Early consultation with local communities on bus services is happening in some parts of Wales but according to our members this is not yet universal.

Local authorities should be encouraged through franchises, and partnerships, to consider how demand responsive transport can be integrated into the transport network. Again, this should look at cars and smaller vehicles, as well as integrating demand responsive services using minibuses. Demand responsive transport does not always have to be delivered by the community transport sector but this should be a conversation about how all services, and providers, can make the biggest impact on the travel network.

Capital and revenue investment should focus on ensuring the viability of marginal routes, and services, to ensure Wales' least mobile citizens are able to get to where they need to be.

Building Resilience in the Local Transport Network

The consultation sets out to build a local bus network which offers ‘better services for passengers, a fair deal for bus operators and clearer arrangements for local authorities to plan and organise local transport in their area.’ To achieve this we have reached a number of conclusions.

We support the idea of a regional multi-modal ticketing as we believe it increases the travel options for some of Wales’ most isolated residents. Community transport operators should have the option to opt-in to such a scheme. Following feedback from our members, we believe it is key that any regional ticketing scheme is easy to administer, recognises the different capacities for absorbing costs between operators, and is delivered through an easy to understand framework across the commercial and voluntary transport sectors.

Through subsidies, commissioning and grants, the Welsh Government should encourage pro-social bus networks, which take into account the broader economic, social and environmental well-being of the relevant area. In particular, members told us that they would like to see more done to advertise the benefits of bus travel.

We believe bus services are valuable community assets. Therefore the Welsh Government should consider how the allocation of state subsidies and concessionary fares can more effectively support marginal routes and services run by community transport operators. In response to our survey members were concerned that concessionary fares reimbursement rates meant they were missing out on vital revenue. We believe the Welsh Government should look again at the use of concessionary fares on S.19 Permit services, and consider appropriate reimbursement levels, commensurate with the non-commercial nature of community transport.

If we want people and services to be able to shine on a shoestring we need to invest better and smarter – not just providing revenue to run services but to provide longer term investment, which enables organisations to look upwards and outwards, to develop new services and collaborate with like-minded organisations across the industry. **In Wales in particular, it is necessary to investigate how long-term investment in community transport could play a role in alleviating social isolation.** This investigation should consider the role community transport can play in the contribution toward achieving the ambitions of the Wellbeing of Future Generation Act.

Local authorities and transport providers should work to make services more integrated through ticketing, planning, and delivery of services. This is to enable a broader range of travel choices for local communities.

Contact Details

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