



community transport
association

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Welsh Government's Connected Communities Tackling Loneliness and Social Isolation Consultation

**A response from the Community Transport
Association**

Introduction

The CTA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Welsh Government's consultation on loneliness and social isolation in Wales. We are pleased by the recognition that loneliness and social isolation is indiscriminating, affecting people of all ages and backgrounds, and the efforts to address its impact on mental and physical well-being.

Community transport operators across Wales work with some of the most isolated communities in the country. Their footprint tends to be rural, and the demographic of service users tends to be older people and people with disabilities. As such, community transport is integral to enabling journeys for many lonely and isolated individuals to access vital services that are essential to their health and wellbeing.

Community transport services are primarily provided through either a section 19 permit which offers door-to-door transport predominantly for those with mobility issues, or through section 22 permits, which enable not-for-profit entities to run timetabled local bus services for the benefit of the community. They often use minibuses rather than larger buses, enabling them to operate routes with low levels of frequency and patronage, such as those serving rural villages, in a cost-effective way.

On top of this, high levels of volunteer involvement, the ability to attract charitable funds, accessible vehicles and a not-for-profit business model all mean that community transport is often a more reliable and resilient way of meeting a greater range of transport needs, especially for our more isolated and vulnerable citizens.

Q7. What more can the Welsh Government do to support the provision of transport services across Wales

The consultation speaks of delivering a 'safe, affordable and reliable integrated transport system across Wales'. The CTA support this vision and believe that any intervention in the transport system should be done with a view to increasing accessibility.

Community transport is an accessible and inclusive transport option, which is run for a social purpose and community benefit, often where the market has failed to provide services that can cater for the full range of needs within a community. This is due either to 'unprofitable' services being reduced, withdrawn or altered, leaving communities, particularly in rural areas, either without service altogether or with limited services that do not meet needs; or because the commercial services that are available are inaccessible particularly to those with mobility issues, such as the elderly and disabled.

The CTA recognise that the Welsh Government have been supportive of the community transport sector in the past, as demonstrated by the Enterprise and Business Committee's inquiry into bus and community transport services in Wales in 2015-16. However, we are concerned that there has not been similar focus on the value of the community transport

sector in more recent Welsh Government policy; the 'Improving public transport' consultation recently launched by the Welsh Government provides only the most minimal mention of CT services, and we are afraid that there is a risk that the positive work of the past will be forgotten.

To support transport provision, we believe there needs to be greater attention given to the strengths and contribution of community transport within public policy making. This consideration has to be much more than a conversation about community transport running alternatives when commercial or subsidised services 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 improve access to our bus networks; it needs to better explore how community transport can contribute to the plurality of transport providers in a more joined up way to improve transport provision as a whole.

To support community transport services across Wales, we recommend:

Expanding funding opportunities:

Local authority cuts to subsidised services, coupled with commercial cuts to 'unprofitable' services, have left communities either without service altogether or with limited services that do not meet needs, particularly for those with mobility issues. This means that many communities are left without transport to reach everyday services and social activities vital to the prevention of loneliness and social isolation.

Much of this unmet need is left to community transport organisations to fill – a significant increase in demand which they are often not funded for, placing pressure on existing services and impacting the ability of CTOs to keep on top of maintenance costs.

While cuts have impacted communities across the UK, they are having a particularly detrimental impact in rural areas, where the larger areas and lower levels of patronage mean that routes are less profitable and therefore more difficult to fund; while passengers have fewer transport alternatives and are hence more reliant on community transport. Powys, for example, with a small population to area ratio, has not been able to benefit from the funding that more densely populated areas in Wales have, despite suffering from the largest cuts to services and funding than any other local authority in Wales.

To enable CT providers to continue providing their lifeline services, sustainable long term funding from all tiers of government in Wales is vital. 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.

Facilitating voluntary work:

Discounted/free parking for volunteer drivers and specialist parking and set-down points for community minibuses would help to improve the accessibility of high streets, enabling community transport operators to better assist passengers closer to their destinations.

Improving commissioning

- Community-led:

Our commitment to 'transport localism' means we want people to have a say in shaping their local transport and creating community led solutions where they can. A more integrated passenger transport network that meets more needs has to be built from the ground up, building on existing assets and capacity within communities so that the 'ground-up' part is authentic and rooted in the experiences of people who know the patch and the priorities.

Better integration is not about more money or new rules, rather it is about better use of resources already in place. Often services are commissioned in isolation, or without reference to the wider public need. All services when commissioned need to show how they will integrate with existing service and help provide a greater plurality of provision.

- Multi-modal

Lack of confidence about the first or last part of an end-to-end journey might mean that it never takes place or someone drives all the way. This is particularly pertinent in rural areas where the bus stop or train station is situated further from a user's home. The future of transport in rural areas should encompass demand-responsive services which can boost the patronage of existing services; community transport often provides the first and last mile of a journey, transporting users from their home to public transport stops/stations, enabling the journey to happen at all.

- Accessible

CTA encourages targeting improvements to those with the greatest needs, which makes it better for everyone else too. This is a simple premise – if something is not good for someone with a visual impairment, arthritis or dementia, then chances are that it is not that great for many other people, too. If local authorities placed the accessibility of a route and service at the heart of the procurement and commissioning process as a key criteria, this would ensure that services are accessible by default rather than by design much later in the process.

Measuring impact

Many of the challenges faced by CTOs stem from the undervaluing of community transport. To tackle this issue, the Welsh Government should look to creating a way of consistently measuring the social and economic value that community transport brings, particularly in the arena of health and social care.

Developing an impact framework would help to encourage financial support, in the process facilitating ties with health bodies and local authorities.

Q11. What more can we do to encourage people who are at risk of becoming lonely and isolated to get involved with local groups that promote physical activity?

Q12: In what other ways can health services play their part in reducing loneliness and social isolation?

Q17. What more can we do to build community resilience and support communities to combat loneliness and social isolation?

The CTA support the link between loneliness and social isolation with mental and physical health issues, and agree on the importance of health and community solutions to alleviating loneliness and social isolation. We also agree that physical activity is fundamental to the prevention of ill health and that it can provide opportunities for people who are lonely and socially isolated to meet new people and broaden their social contacts.

Community transport is fundamental to enabling vulnerable people to access services that are vital to their physical and mental health in several key ways.

Firstly, community transport enables passengers to reach medical appointments, social activities and group meetings, which they would not otherwise be able to access. Many of these activities are designed specifically to foster friendships and reduce loneliness and isolation, such as lunch clubs, craft groups and dementia groups.

Secondly, community transport operators provide these social services themselves, and sometimes in collaboration with local charities such as Age UK, Citizens Advice Bureau, or local authorities, by forming local groups that encourage lonely people to leave their homes, interact with others and stay mobile. These consist of Travel Clubs, offering excursions to the seaside, gardens, stately homes, etc; social clubs, where members meet to enjoy activities including poetry, art, seated exercise, etc; mental health groups, such as memory clinics and dementia groups, which offer dementia and social isolation training courses, and general support and advice for those with low level anxiety, stress and depression.

Thirdly, journeys on community transport themselves are often social settings where passengers are able to socialise and make new friends. Particularly in rural areas, journey times can be long, and passengers are encouraged to chat to one another. This sense of community on the vehicle is an important element in enabling users, particularly those who feel vulnerable and have no other opportunities to interact with others, to feel safe on CT, especially when need for the service often stems from the loss of a partner.

We feel it is important to champion the merits of a shared transport experience where taking a journey with others helps our physical and mental well-being. All too often innovations in the transport space are about personalisation and autonomy and we need to take care to ensure these do not reduce social connectedness and foster greater isolation.

Finally, many community transport drivers and passenger assistants personally provide help and reassurance by forming supportive relationships with passengers, which is key in reducing

feelings of loneliness and isolation. Drivers and passenger assistants are often seen as carers who provide companionship and think more holistically about passengers' needs, in addition to getting them from A to B. Many of our members know their passengers by name and ensure they have entered their homes safely before leaving, speak to passengers on the phone, and generally provide a caring service which encourages clients to feel confident to open up about their environment and difficulties. Due to this close relationship with passengers, many are able to detect signs of mental and physical issues and refer passengers to the necessary sources of help, acting as informal **social prescribers**.

Without community transport, many of the projects and groups set up to tackle loneliness would not be possible, essentially because their members would not be able to reach them in the first place. As such, community transport should be considered the enabler of loneliness and isolation projects, or the glue that binds different initiatives together, culminating in the enhanced well-being of vulnerable people within the community.

Many of our members attribute their success in reducing their passengers' feelings of loneliness and isolation to strong relationships with local community groups, such as self-care groups, charities, local authorities and GP surgeries. This collaboration is considered essential for sharing best practice and ideas, as well as to expand reach and impact, particularly in rural areas where people are dispersed over large areas.

Concurrently, many of our members cite poor communication and lack of collaboration with other agencies as limitations on success. Through engagement with community transport operators, we have heard how health agencies, such as GP surgeries, often expect community transport operators to provide journeys to appointments without funding them to do so, considering 'health' and 'transport' to be separate spheres.

CTA has also observed how projects in the wider charity sector that funded by grant-makers don't give sufficient attention to planning how people will access those services and transport planning can be an afterthought once budgets and resources have been allocated. For example, Pembrokeshire Association of Community Transport Projects have found that social prescribing services and social workers have arranged for clients to attend activities or courses without considering how they will get there or if they are able to navigate the public transport system when public transport is available to them.

This doesn't mean that every project needs its own minibus, as most of the needs new projects want to serve could be met in partnership with CTA members, which is already common practice for many charities. Where charities have minibuses that have under-used capacity these can be pooled for community use through a local brokerage scheme run by a community transport operator. We believe that it is important to build on existing assets and capacity within communities so that solutions are rooted in the experiences of people who know the area and its priorities. The nature of CT passengers means that our members have an important insight into the lives of vulnerable peoples whose needs are not always represented.

To support communities and facilitate lonely and isolated people's involvement with local groups that promote physical and mental activity, health services and local groups should

ensure that when initiating projects to combat loneliness and isolation, transport is considered a key requirement during the planning process. Moreover, it should be mandatory for community transport operators to be consulted with during the planning stages, especially if they are later expected to provide services to enable users to reach groups and services.

Q13. What more can the Welsh Government do to encourage people to volunteer?

Q15. How can employers and businesses play their part in reducing loneliness and social isolation?

CTA are pleased that the role of employment has been recognised as a factor in preventing or combatting individual feelings of loneliness and social isolation. The enablement of employment is one of the key areas addressed by community transport, especially for rural communities which are poorly served by the commercial network. This is achieved either through Wheels to Work schemes, or timetabled bus services.

In Pembrokeshire, for example, a population of less than 125,000 is dispersed widely across an area of over 1,500km². They are poorly served by commercial public transport, and have suffered from cuts to bus services. Consequently, the local community came together to form Preseli Rural Transport Association (also known as Green Dragon Bus) to meet unfulfilled transport needs. After noticing that many community members were struggling to access employment opportunities or to take on extra shifts, Green Dragon Bus decided to start a Wheels to Work scheme, where they rent out mopeds to those in need. They are currently also in discussions with several Jobcentres to provide their flexible transport solution to employers. Similarly, Bridgend Community Transport have recently set up a Wheels to Work scheme to assist those who reside in the rural valley areas of the county but who work outside of the county, as well as to help those who work early morning or late evening shifts, when there are no available public transport services.

These programmes have enabled communities to retain their young people, and enabled those who previously relied on colleagues for lifts to work, such as carers and builders, to become independent. It has also contributed to local businesses by making them more accessible to the workforce and customers. Individually, users have reported that the scheme has had a positive effect on their mental health by enabling them to work and socialise where they had previously been stuck at home, feeling lonely and socially isolated from friends and the working community.

There are also good examples in England of community transport providers setting up local bus services to cater for those prohibited from accessing employment due to bus services not running early or late enough for them to reach work on time or get home affordably and safely. In 2014, Ilfracombe and District Community Transport teamed with local Councillors, Devon County Council and Barnstaple Job Centre to run a bus service 7 nights a week over

the summer period to provide evening transport to employees at hotels, pubs and holiday camps; local employers were desperate for staff and there was a pool of unemployed people willing to work but without transport. This type of coordination between CT, job centres, local authorities and employers is one that can be replicated by many businesses.

Unfortunately, Ilfracombe and District CT had to stop running their service due to a lack of financial support, to the disappointment of those who were reliant on the service to reach work. Given that employers have benefitted from Wheels to Work schemes and the setting up of community bus services, CTA would strongly advocate employers and businesses partnering with CT organisations and helping to finance these schemes.

Such proactive support may also encourage employees who have used these services to volunteer as a way of giving back to a community service which has impacted them so positively. On top of this, many businesses often have spaces which can be leveraged for community use, for example for community groups to meet and to conduct activities in, which should be more actively encouraged by the Welsh Government. Moreover, greater awareness of volunteering opportunities should be spread by employers.

Q19. Are you aware of examples of successful interventions within Wales, or beyond, that you think we should be looking at?

Community transport is vital in enabling countless journeys for lonely and isolated people who would otherwise be unable to leave their homes and lead healthy, independent lives, particularly for those living in the rural regions of Wales. As encapsulated by Transport Manager of Llanwrtyd Wells Community Transport Project, 'CT is about overcoming isolation and disenfranchisement, bringing communities together and empowering the communities to work together for the good of everyone.'

CTA are currently delivering a new project, The Connecting Communities in Wales Project (part of the Welsh Government's Rural Development Programme 2014-2020), which is working to increase and improve the services available at a local level to ensure that more people, especially in rural areas, can benefit from flexible and affordable transport. So far, successful bids have been awarded to organisations which support older people with disabilities and dementia sufferers. Still in progress is a bid to purchase 50 scooters for a Wheels to Work scheme and a recruitment drive for volunteer drivers. We support provision similar to this for the future.

There have also been several programmes outside of Wales which have contributed to helping community transport deliver benefits to lonely and isolated people. The Community Minibus Fund in England, which provided funding for 390 community transport providers (£25 million in the first round and a further £2 million in the second round) to help purchase new minibuses, is a notable example and helped to expand CT operations, thereby connecting more people to their communities. This is something that could be rolled out in

Wales. The second round of funding was aimed at operators who provide transport for educational organisations; in Wales, funding could be targeted at CT organisations working in collaboration with loneliness projects and charities.

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