Welsh Parliament
Climate Change, Environment, and Infrastructure Committee

Stakeholder event on bus and rail services – 17 March 2022

March 2022

Introduction

1.   In January 2022, the Committee published its priorities for the Sixth Senedd. They included the future of public transport and recovery of services post-Covid. The Committee held a stakeholder event on 17 March 2022 as part of the evidence gathering for that work.

2.   The session aimed to understand stakeholders' views on the effectiveness of bus and rail services, their future purpose, barriers to the public in using them, and perspectives on the effectiveness of Welsh and UK Government policy. Twenty stakeholders covering several areas of interest, including passenger representative groups from across Wales, attended the event.

3.   This document summarises the issues raised with the Committee during the event.

Issues raised with the Committee

Public transport strategy

4.   Many contributors said the Covid-19 pandemic had fundamentally altered people's day-to-day lives, and public transport needs to adapt to this. For example, the need for capacity to meet the demand to commute to the workplace for a specific time may change with increases in flexible working.

5.   Several stakeholders recognised that public transport usage is related to the quality of the offer - the better the provision, the more it is used. Inevitably, a degree of risk will be associated with the type of investment needed to secure increases in usage.

6.   Stakeholders expressed support for Llwybr Newydd, but they were concerned about the capacity to deliver the strategy. They added that too many regional initiatives are not currently

aligned – the metro projects, the Burns reforms, and reforms in Local Authorities. However, there is insufficient resource to support delivery, particularly among local authorities.

7. It was suggested that there should be an increased focus on regional transport planning to deliver Llwybr Newydd. Regional transport bodies should be taking the lead across all modes.

8. Several stakeholders emphasised the need for progress following the Burns report on the M4, to demonstrate that improvements are being delivered.

9. Some contributors strongly supported the devolution of all responsibility for rail to Wales.

10. There were some positive comments about the willingness of TfW to engage with stakeholders, including having open, constructive conversations and piloting work in partnership to improve services. However, more passenger involvement is needed to help plan and shape services at local and strategic levels.

Funding

11. Several contributors emphasised the need for adequate funding for bus and rail services. One stakeholder suggested that revenue funding is a bottleneck to the necessary improvements.

12. Some stakeholders referred to what they felt was a historic underfunding of Welsh rail infrastructure by successive UK governments.

13. Stakeholders suggested that community transport should be supported to improve and update their fleet and the service they can provide.

Affordability of services

14. For many, the affordability of bus and rail travel was a key issue. Addressing this could lead to significant increases in passenger numbers. This was particularly the case with the cost-of-living crisis. Some contributors felt that public transport should be free at the point of use as it is a public good.

15. Alongside this, there were calls for a simplification of fare structures. Several contributors referred to examples of good practice, including the Bws ticket in north Wales and the My Travel Pass for young people.

Technology

16. There was broad support for the prevalence of technology in relation to bus and rail travel, including real-time travel information and ticket booking via apps. However, others recognised that the technology is not accessible to all, so it must be part of a suite of approaches. Some contributors suggested there needs to be better access to travel information onboard buses and trains and at interchanges.

Access to services

17. There were concerns that bus and rail services are not accessible to all. Apart from the location of stations or stops and their physical accessibility, it is often difficult to access information about travel times or delays.

18. Some contributors expressed concern that active travel policies are only relevant to physically fit and able people and, therefore, are not as inclusive as they should be.

19. Accessing services in rural areas continues to be a concern. There was also concern that areas with already-limited services would suffer twofold from any further reductions in service provision resulting from the Covid pandemic.

20. Timetables need to reflect users' needs and connect communities.

People with disabilities

21. Several contributors were concerned about poor accessibility to bus and train services for people with disabilities. There were calls for step-free access at all stations, ramp access on all buses, sufficient space on trains and buses for wheelchairs, and adequate provision for people who are blind or deaf.

22. Some disabled people might experience a lack of confidence after the pandemic. This might be addressed by travel training for such passengers and disability equality training for all transport staff.

Community transport

23. There was considerable support for the services provided by community transport. One stakeholder emphasised that it is an important option for all and "not just for older people."

24. There were calls for more funding and visible support to allow the community transport sector to fulfil its potential as an equal partner in the transport mix, working alongside communities and other transport modes. There was also a suggestion that more community transport opportunities should be encouraged, particularly in rural areas.

25. One stakeholder said there had been positive engagement from certain local authorities and health boards in parts of Wales where community transport is valued and invested in as a key part of the transport network. However, this was not consistent across Wales.

Reliable services

26. For many, restoring user confidence in bus and rail services will be vital after the pandemic. One way to achieve this is by providing a more reliable service. This is necessary if there is a policy ambition for people to use public transport rather than cars in their daily lives. As one contributor pointed out, unreliable connections can have serious implications for users who are dependent on public transport - "one or two late journeys can mean unemployment."

Infrastructure

27. Linked to the issues of accessibility and reliability was infrastructure. There is a need to ensure that the right infrastructure is in place first so that services can be layered on top. There is a need to tackle congestion and provide buses with priority measures – this will result in more reliable journey times and encourage more people to use services.

Integration of services

28. The better integration of public transport services (buses, rail, and taxis) was a major issue for most contributors. The three key areas that would lead to better integration were: ticketing, timetabling, and proximity of infrastructure.

29. Several contributors pointed to examples of good practice in relation to ticketing, such as the Bws ticket in North Wales and the Young Person's Pass. There was a view that ticketing should be simplified and that integrated ticketing across bus and rail services is vital.

30. Bus and rail timetables should be aligned so that passengers can switch between modes without long waits for a connection. There was an acknowledgement that scheduling would be challenging across more than one mode. A 15-minute wait for a connecting train might feel too long for some passengers, with shorter times meaning an increased risk of missing their connection.

31. Better integration also means locating bus and rail stations nearer to each other. That would make it more convenient for the passenger to switch between different modes of transport.

32. Contributors suggested that there should also be better integration with other forms of active travel, such as walking and cycling. One suggestion heard by the Committee was that

buses should be more able to carry bicycles. These linkages should form the bedrock of the public transport system and need more work.

33. Better integration should also be pursued between different operators. For example, for passengers at Newport when changing to get to Bristol and beyond.

Behavioural change

34. Behavioural change was, as expected, a key issue. Contributors acknowledged that behavioural change is not something that happens on its own. Instead, it comes about because services have improved. Accessibility, affordability, and reliability should be the initial focus. The public transport network and infrastructure are not currently suitable to respond to a significant shift away from car use. Many people who would potentially like to shift to using more public transport are not able to currently because of the deficiencies of services.

35. There was also support for measures to remove incentives for car use among the general population. There is a balance to be struck between incentivising public transport and disincentivising car use. There was an acceptance that some people will continue to need to use a car e.g. for health or mobility reasons. They will need access to facilities such as parking spaces.

Staffing

36. Several contributors talked about rail and bus staff and complimented the service provided. Staff were described as a valuable resource, and their feedback about the services should be listened to and valued. The significant role that staff play in ensuring the safety of passengers was emphasised, including being a reassuring face for passengers in need.

37. Passenger safety was an issue raised by many, particularly for women on buses and trains. They referred to buses and trains being full on days when large-scale sporting events take place.

38. There was concern about the need to ensure that problems with recruitment are addressed, particularly the need to bring younger bus drivers into the industry. It was suggested that bus driver qualifications could be offered through local colleges and should include customer service training alongside driver training.