

INTRODUCTION

1. The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) represents the 22 local authorities in Wales. The three national park authorities and the three fire and rescue authorities are associate members.
2. It seeks to provide representation to local authorities within an emerging policy framework that satisfies priorities of our members and delivers a broad range of services that add value to Welsh Local Government and the communities they serve.
3. WLGA welcomes the opportunity to feed comments into the Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee's inquiry into the impact of congestion on the bus industry in Wales. Comments are offered below on each of the issues highlighted for the inquiry.

How does congestion affect the bus sector in Wales and how does this compare to other parts of the UK?

4. According to Bus Users Cymru over 100 million passenger journeys are made by bus each year in Wales and bus travel accounts for around 80% of all public transport journeys. The primary impact of congestion on the bus sector is that journey times for passengers are becoming longer from start to destination. The secondary impacts are:
 - To achieve the same frequency of service, more services are needed and this increases operators' costs
 - There is less certainty over the arrival time of services
 - Longer journey times, higher fares (to cover increased costs) and uncertainty over bus times result in fewer people using buses
 - Reduced patronage reduces operator income which adds to pressures to cut services.
5. Whilst other factors are at play (e.g. cuts in level of public subsidy) the consequences are clear. Welsh Government figures indicate that the number of registered bus services in Wales declined by approximately 46%, from 1,943 services to 1,058 between March 2005 and March 2015. The number of bus passenger journeys declined by 19% between 2008 and 2015 and a further million journeys were lost in the year ending March 2016.
6. In contrast, rail passenger numbers have been increasing. Welsh Government statistics show that there were 30.31 million rail passenger journeys which either started or ended

in Wales in 2015-16, an increase of 3.36 per cent compared to the previous year. Over two-thirds (68 per cent) of these journeys were within Wales. Increasing levels of travel by rail can help to reduce congestion on the roads. However, it is important to note that the total number of rail passengers is less than a third of the number of bus passengers. Buses remain a significant source of transport for a large proportion of the population. They also meet the needs many more isolated (especially rural) communities that any expansion of the rail network is unlikely to address.

7. These issues are not dissimilar to many other parts of the UK, although the geographic configuration of some areas (e.g. with Valleys feeding into coastal urban areas) is an important, albeit not unique, factor.
 8. To ensure the regions of Wales can function effectively and efficiently it is important that congestion is tackled. This needs to be done in an integrated way that looks across all transport modes to identify the best solutions.
 9. Local authorities are at the forefront of taking forward regional economic development initiatives (City Deals in South West and South East Wales, Growth Deal in the North and Growing Mid Wales). Improved transportation is a key component of these initiatives. Without the planned improvements to all modes of transport including bus then the economic benefits will not be fully realised.
 10. The Cardiff Capital Region City Deal is underpinned by the South-East Metro project. This is a combination of improved bus and rail services across the region. Specifically, for bus services this involves improvement both to the vehicles and to the highway infrastructure. For example, where feasible, the introduction of priority/dedicated lanes for buses may encourage car drivers consistently stuck in congestion to consider switching their mode of travel.
 11. An improved bus sector will assist with the movement of people around the four regions whether for business or leisure purposes. However, bus travel will not be considered an attractive alternative to the private car so long as congestion impacts on punctuality and the individual's ability to get to their destination on time or to catch a connecting service.
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How should policy be improved to address the impact of congestion on the bus sector?

12. Buses on the highway network should encounter minimum congestion to allow journey times to meet the timetable.
13. There are already several policy levers available to the Welsh Government and local government which could assist with reducing congestion. However, in many cases this would require considerable investment in the highway infrastructure over a sustained period. In the short term, undertaking works on the highway network could impact negatively and create more congestion requiring close liaison with bus operators to manage any disruption.
14. Another important consideration relates to the need to achieve decarbonisation in the transport sector. Both the Climate Change Act 2008 and the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 commit to an 80% reduction in emissions by 2050 against a 1990 baseline. The latter Act, specifically for Wales, introduces a series of carbon budgets. Since transport accounts for around a quarter of greenhouse gas emissions, it is inescapable that some measures will be needed that focus specifically on transport. More attention needs to be given to the transport sector in this respect (contrast, for example, the efforts being made to reduce emissions associated with waste and property).
15. Congestion, which results in idling engines, is known to create additional, higher levels of emissions (with associated health issues). Buses use less fuel per person carried and hence can produce less pollution than the number of cars they replace. Therefore, it would seem clear that policies to encourage greater use of buses should be included as part of any package of measures to address decarbonisation targets. Reducing congestion will assist in the operation of bus services and keep costs down. Better, more reliable services should lead to an increase in patronage and therefore income. Clearly, there are mutual benefits to be realised. Policies to reduce congestion, therefore, will need to look at ways of giving priority to, and encouraging greater use of, buses (as well as other public transport and active travel). Switching car users onto buses and reducing vehicle idling times will have a beneficial impact on air quality.

Whether congestion has an impact on the need for public subsidy of bus services in Wales?

16. This will require public funding to redesign parts of the highway network to allocate dedicated bus lanes and increased funding to encourage non-car travel including active travel.
17. It is important though too, and in line with the Well-being of Future Generations Act, to take a whole-systems view of any 'subsidy' of the bus service. Whilst some bus services are run on a commercial basis, all well-planned services (especially subsidised ones) can be linked to 'public goods'. They generate a range of benefits (without profit) to all members of society. These 'goods' include reductions in congestion with benefits for local businesses and economies, reductions in emissions and associated improvements in air quality, improved labour market linkage between places of supply and demand, improved possibilities for social interaction (especially for older people and those on low income without cars), access to health services (helping to prevent cases from becoming acute and more expensive to treat) and can help to keep communities 'alive', especially in rural (and often Welsh language) heartlands. Such benefits are hard to 'cost' but should be taken into consideration in any assessment of the need for public subsidy of bus services.

For further information please contact:

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