

Inquiry into Integrated Public Transport

Evidence from First Group

Enterprise and Business Committee Inquiry into Integrated Public Transport

This document forms the written evidence of FirstGroup plc (First) to the Enterprise and Business Committee inquiry into Integrated Public Transport. The terms of reference and Key Issues are reproduced below in bold, with the response from First following in italics under each heading.

First Cymru is the leading provider of local bus services across much of south Wales, in addition to the high quality express Greyhound coach service between Swansea and Cardiff. First Cymru operates a fleet of over 320 vehicles operating out of local depots in Cardiff, Maesteg, Bridgend, Port Talbot, Swansea, Llanelli and Ammanford/Ty Croes, and employs approximately 750 people.

First Great Western (FGW) operates mainline passenger rail services from South Wales to London Paddington, together with services linking Cardiff with the south coast of England and Somerset. Services that operate between South Wales and England represent approximately 27% of FGW total revenue. The Great Western Rail Utilisation Strategy predicted growth in passenger journeys between 2008 and 2019 to be at least 32%. This has proved to be an underestimate with some areas already experiencing growth of 41%, and FGW has invested in services and rolling stock to deal with this extra demand.

The terms of reference for the inquiry are:

- **How well is Welsh public transport integrated, particularly in relation to bus, rail and community transport services, and what factors limit integration?**

Integration between bus and rail services in Wales is currently dichotomous between urban and rural areas. Whilst urban areas such as Cardiff, Swansea and Newport show a degree of successful integration due to their proximity to main line rail services coupled dense local bus networks serving local areas, this is not necessarily true for more rural areas and is therefore difficult to quantify. Wales has a number of distinctive features, for example a difficult terrain in many areas, absence of large cities, and a lack of employment opportunities in more rural areas to name just a few.

A common thread of integration in both urban and rural Wales is the PLUSBUS initiative, providing bus information at rail facilities and seamless through ticketing. PLUSBUS is available for onward bus travel from 26 major and minor Welsh rail stations, and season tickets are available for this product at all these stations alongside the one-day product.

Factors which limit bus-rail integration in Welsh rural areas include;

- *lack of good physical interchange facilities at rail stations with other forms of public transport,*
- *lack of passenger information resulting from poor communication between bus and rail operators where delays occur therefore leading to a lack of passenger assurance that a multi-stage journey will successfully link up,*
- *limited service frequency and poor reliability due to limited bus priority and congestion caused by traffic volumes and obstructions,*

- *withdrawal of commercial bus operations due to increasing costs and withdrawal of supported services due to budgetary constraints placed on local authorities*
- *Perceived passenger security at stations*

Whilst urban areas generally enjoy a higher standard of integration between transport modes, it should be noted that these areas also suffer from the issues above.

Benefits could be derived from adoption of common traffic engineering standards, whereby each local authority would be required to make adequate provision for integration between bus and rail. Adoption of a minimum standard of interchange infrastructure – i.e. at least a bus shelter with raised curb for the nearest bus stops outside a rail station, together with provision for customer information displays, would go a long way towards alleviating intermodal interchange problems at marginal cost.

Considering integration between local bus services and between local bus and community transport services, there are examples of good practice from both the public and private sectors. Some local authorities have done much to provide an integrated network of bus services that the user can perceive as such and therefore be more confident of being able to make complex journeys. An excellent example of this in earlier years was in Gwynedd, where the Bws Gwynedd network combined operators' commercial services with a network of tendered routes serving more remote communities. A common brand, with integrated ticketing and comprehensive publicity was initially introduced, but funding constraints have weakened the proposition in more recent years. Some authorities, a good example being Carmarthenshire, still practice good integration when considering the need for tendered services to ensure that these complement, rather than abstract from, the commercial bus network whereas others seem less concerned with this principle.

Bus operators have made significant moves to improve integration, with the inclusion of other operators' services in timetables now increasingly prevalent. Whilst multi-operator ticketing has perhaps not been developed as rapidly as in other areas, there is a good example of an all operator travelcard in the Explorer Wales TravelPass. Opportunities will exist for similar products to be developed to meet more local needs. Legislation exists which we understand has not yet been adopted by the Welsh Assembly Government which would permit operators to agree to coordinate their timetables thereby providing enhanced services to the public through the delivery of even headways on competing services through Qualifying Agreements under the Local Transport Act 2008.

Development of Quality Partnership Agreements between operators and local authorities would facilitate the development of agreed joint investment programmes to improve the delivery of bus services by removing sources of congestion and disruption, agreeing stability of timetables, improving the quality of vehicles and ensuring a greater degree of coordination and attendant information provision.

One area where little has been done to integrate services is between local bus and voluntary sector or social services provision. This lies within the gift of the local authorities and whilst the benefits are relatively small, they can often be realised at low cost. Once again, the need to consider these as complementary modes is of paramount importance, with care being required to ensure that community transport and similar services are not abstracting from conventional bus services leading to the eventual withdrawal of the latter.

In terms of the availability of information for passengers prior to making a journey, Traveline Cymru has done sterling work in the compilation and maintenance of a timetable database which can be accessed by phone and through the internet. Addition of fares information to this would greatly enhance its value to the potential traveller,

- **How successful are legal, policy and administrative / delivery arrangements in Wales in supporting effective, integrated public transport services that meet the needs of Welsh travellers?**

The Welsh Transport Strategy – 'One Wales - Connecting the Nation' sets out policy objectives for transport integration and the creation of four beacon "sustainable towns", one in each of the four transport consortium regions. The Strategy correctly identifies public transport as the key to improving social, economic and environmental objectives, including improved access to employment

and encouraging healthy lifestyles. Other objectives are more broadly based including the reduction of carbon emissions by 3% by 2011, but we are not aware of any work to determine the scale of progress towards achieving this. With increasing funding constraints on development of public transport and infrastructure, the achievement of the intended policies has to date been limited by necessity.

First is aware of these policy objectives and endeavours to provide a local bus network which supports them, and calls on Welsh Government work more closely with the local authorities, regional consortia and all operators in partnership to achieve more. However the recent cuts in Bus Service Operator Grant and Local Transport Services Grant act against the achievement of these objectives by reducing the income streams of operators and authorities respectively.

Whilst typically rail is considered to be worthy of additional investment and to be a major contributor to local and national economic prosperity, it is notable that the same consideration is not given to local bus. However, recent independent research commissioned by Greener Journeys, demonstrates that the bus is vital to and makes a significant contribution to the local economy; this is fully reported in the Buses and Economic Growth report dated July 2012.

As noted above, there is legislation available to the WAG which would enable a greater degree of integration between local bus services than is otherwise legally permitted.

- **What steps can be taken to improve public transport integration in Wales?**

There are four main components which are essential for successful public transport integration:

1. Information for passengers (and potential passengers) – before and during their journey.
2. Integrated multi-modal ticketing including modern purchase methods
3. High quality interchange infrastructure and facilities on a consistent basis, commensurate with the population served.
4. The ability to provide timely connections between the differing modes of transport.

All of the above have already been provided to some extent but the degree and geographical coverage is widely varied. To make public transport a credible alternative to the private car where one is available, and to maximise its availability to those without such access, integration needs to ensure that the complete door-to-door journey is convenient, easy to use, safe, cost effective, frequent, and reliable, with journey times and changes kept to a minimum.

Key issues

Issues that the Committee may wish to consider as part of these terms of reference include:

- **How can the integration of rail, bus and community transport services in Wales be supported and improved to meet the needs of communities and businesses in both rural and urban Wales?**

A coordinating role for local and national government, in partnership with all operators, will lead to improved integration and a public transport system that meets the needs of both local and national economies. Formation and maintenance of good business relationships between transport operators, communities / business and Welsh Government, local authorities and the Regional Transport Consortia should aim to deliver improved infrastructure and improved services in a coordinated and complementary manner as described above. The role of local communities and businesses should not be underestimated and their support is vital to successful delivery of these objectives. Where this

support can be manifest in practical or financial contributions this should act as an accelerant to delivery of local improvement measures.

- **How successful are Regional Transport Consortia in supporting the provision of effective, integrated public transport?**

The success of the four Regional Transport Consortia in Wales is dependent upon their ability to develop, manage and fund the provision of integrated services both within and between their respective areas. This requires working in partnership with other stakeholders as described above. An essential component of this is the establishment and maintenance of a good relationship with their constituent local authorities, and to assess and prioritise spending and policy promotion where these can be in conflict locally.

At a practical level, in order to support integration between and within the differing modes, Welsh Government and local authorities must focus not just the promotion and facilitation of coordination, but also on the provision of infrastructure to enable the delivery of both good physical interchange but also reliable and punctual services. Provision of bus priority measures has not been a high priority in recent years and is essential if complex journeys are to be undertaken by public transport, to ensure that connection can be guaranteed and that journey times are attractive and competitive with the private car. In many cases it is the managing out of journey time variability which is the main objective and principal benefit, rather than accelerating the mean journey time. Working with stakeholders, in particular operators, will assist in identification of the greatest benefits and operators' practical experience of the success of various traffic management and enforcement techniques is invaluable in the development of solutions that maximise value for money.

- **How effectively does Welsh Government policy support public transport integration? In particular, the Welsh Government is considering the establishment of Joint Transport Authorities in Wales, and the feasibility of operating the Wales and Borders rail franchise on a not-for-dividend basis. Additionally, the Minister for Local Government and Communities has indicated that he is considering the use of quality partnerships and contracts in delivery of bus services. How far would these proposals improve integrated public transport provision in Wales?**

First believes that the Welsh Government could do more to promote and support public transport integration, and the establishment of Joint Transport Authorities may be the way to achieve this provided that they became the single local authority tier responsible for transport, including highways issues, in their area in order to facilitate a truly coordinated approach.

The model of Quality Partnerships has delivered major benefits in many areas of the UK but its adoption in Wales is relatively limited. Where it has been adopted the benefits have been significant. Particularly successful has been the Swansea for Metro service, a partnership between First and City and County of Swansea Council, which has transformed a cross city local bus service into a more frequent and more punctual Bus Rapid Transit system with significant passenger growth. This was a purely local initiative and clearly demonstrated the maximisation of benefits within limited budget constraints through the adoption of a voluntary partnership whereby each party engaged in an open and constructive manner and through long term commitment to partnership maximised each other's business case for investment. There is an opportunity to extend the benefits of partnership working through the adoption by the Welsh Government of the provisions of the Local Transport Act 2008 which would enable operators to work together to offer coordinated services, thereby potentially offering a better service to the public without additional expenditure, without the risk of being caught by competition legislation.

Partnership, rather than political control, is the best means of improving public transport, whether rail, bus or community transport. In a partnership each member will maximise their commercial risk knowing that the other partners are equally committed to success, since this also maximises the opportunities and potential rewards. In the bus industry, there is also a role in this process for

Statutory Partnerships, particularly where there is a need to ensure that investment in infrastructure is not abused by operators taking advantage of its benefits but providing substandard services.

However First does not believe that there is any benefit from the adoption of Quality Contracts. Any proposal for Quality Contracts will have an immediate and serious destabilisation effect on local bus service provision as operators see the potential for their business opportunities to be confiscated. Quality Contracts take the provision of local bus services into local authority hands and effectively remove the expertise and knowledge of local operators, whose livelihood is dependent on designing and operating the services which the public want. The cost of a Quality Contract would be borne directly by local council tax payers and local businesses. They will also bear the risk of the designers of the Quality Contract not having made correct financial assumptions. Under a deregulated regime, under any form of partnership, that risk remains with the operators. First would be pleased to expand upon its reasons for supporting the partnership approach rather than Quality Contracts.

Considering the proposal to let the Wales and Borders rail franchise on a not-for-dividend basis, First believes that the key to a successful rail franchise is clarity on the objectives and outputs expected and that this should be achieved using a value for money approach. An effective way to achieve this is through a franchise model that incentivises revenue growth and cost reduction. We believe that the private sector is best placed to achieve a cost effective, growing franchise that ensures a positive outcome for the funder, passengers and stakeholders.

- **What innovative approaches to delivery of public transport in Wales might be considered to improve integration?**

Innovation can take many forms, but experience from elsewhere in the UK indicates that use of the existing Welsh powers and those potentially available under the Local Transport Act 2008 would have facilitated far more wide reaching partnership agreements in the last two years with operators and authorities prepared to offer far more in terms of commitment and investment (where funds permit).

In terms of technology, “quick wins” can be delivered through use of the equipment fitted to operators’ vehicles to maximise fuel efficiency and improve driving standards, as these are capable of providing information to drive real time information systems developed by local authorities. This would potentially greatly extend the coverage of real time information across Wales, increasing passenger confidence on the availability of connections between and within modes.

Rolling out Traveline information availability through alternative portals would also be a quick win. Delivery of such information through the various Smartphone platforms has recently been completed by Traveline Scotland to great effect.

- **How effectively do key stakeholders, particularly transport operators and public bodies, cooperate to ensure effective service delivery?**

There are examples of excellent cooperation between the public and private sectors in the delivery of high quality public transport services in Wales, with the Swansea ftr Metro being one of the best as described above. As the operator, First has invested in state of the art Bus Rapid Transit vehicles, driver training, and a guaranteed minimum level of service whereas the City and County of Swansea built a comprehensive bus priority corridor including bus only carriageway, significant bus lanes, signal priority and a comprehensive renewal of all bus stop infrastructure, and increased its enforcement of bus priority and parking restrictions along the corridor. The partners have entered into a Punctuality Improvement Partnership to continually improve the standard of service provided. These measures resulted in a 30% patronage increase in the first year of opening alone.

In fact bus operators are very keen to work with the public sector in order to maximise effective service delivery. This is most successful in an atmosphere of shared objectives and voluntary partnership, with the operator retaining the ability to manage and control their businesses in a commercial manner, thereby guaranteeing future investment, and without undue political influence being placed upon them.

It is recognised that local authorities are coming under an increasing burden of cost control, and that in the design and tendering of local service contracts there is a necessary tension between cost and quality. Local authorities are commended to speak to their local bus operators at all stages of development of service contracts, as there may be opportunities for operators to modify commercial services at their own risk to meet the authority's aspiration. Where this is not possible, an operator might be persuaded to modify such a commercial service for the payment of a sum to cover the additional cost and risk of so doing, under de-minimis arrangements, rather than seeking a completely new service at significantly increased cost (and attendant risk of undermining the viability of that existing commercial service in the process).

Mutual trust and respect and the recognition not only of the shared objectives but also the different business imperatives of the public and private sectors are the key to successful partnership working and maximisation of benefits at minimum cost.

- **How can the creation of a Network Rail Wales devolved route support effective, integrated public transport in Wales?**

The Department for Transport published a consultation paper on Rail Decentralisation in March 2012 with a view to seeking opinion on potential local devolution of decision making on the operation of passenger rail services in England. This paper considers five options for devolution but notes that not all passenger services lend themselves readily to more local control, and that diseconomies can be introduced with potentially conflicting objectives from geographically adjacent authorities, particularly with local services operated on a potentially marginal basis.

Unlike Scotland, where the boundary interfaces of the rail network are limited to one location each on two cross-border routes, and with similarly discrete passenger services, the interfaces on the rail network on the border between England and Wales are not as simple. This underpins the fact that the Department for Transport is not seeking decentralisation for cross border services in Wales beyond that already established. Network Rail has sought to localise authority and accountability through its Devolution, with Wales being created as the tenth route on the Network.

The new Wales Route does enable more local accountability by Network Rail for the management and development of the network. First believes that the newly established route will enable a greater degree of focus on the needs of the railway within Wales. The involvement of the operators of all services within Wales (as well as the cross-border services which all operators within Wales provide) in strategic decisions relating to the management of train services is important. First believes that the Network Rail team is well placed to ensure that the current relationships and cooperation are maintained and focused on Welsh issues. There are a number of industry forums that already exist in which operators and Network Rail meet to discuss performance, safety and future strategy. Operators also work well together in planning train services to ensure that connections are provided at key nodes (e.g. Cardiff). The new Wales Route will strengthen the focus of these arrangements on Welsh issues.

The planned significant investment in electrification, coupled with Network Rail's signalling renewal schemes, will need careful management to ensure that the outputs are delivered effectively and efficiently. First has unique experience of working with Network Rail, acting as representative of the views of other operators, in delivering significant infrastructure upgrades, most notably at Reading and the works associated with the Thameslink programme. This approach to managing train services during works, particularly when long and complex possessions of the railway are required (such as at Reading), has been recognised by Passenger Focus and the Office of Rail Regulation as best practice. This collaborative approach to management led by Network Rail and involving all operators and funders will be key to the success of these projects.

The inclusion of all stakeholders in the development of rail services and other transport modes is also key to ensuring successful integration of services and First regularly discusses cross-border connectivity with stakeholders in South Wales, including MPs, Welsh Government, AMs, local authority groupings like SWITCH and SEWTA as well as business organisations.

To maintain this good practice, it is important that any role for such a devolved body accepts that bus and community transport systems are largely complementary to rail, even though there are cases

where the two are in direct competition. The main competitor must always be considered to be the private car. No attempt to restrict the provision of local bus services, in order to maximise rail loadings, should be made as part of the definition of any such body's remit.

- **What are the implications of the England and Wales High Level Output Specification and Statement of Funds Available for Control Period 5, published by the UK Government, for the development of integrated rail services in Wales?**

The High Level Output Specification (HLOS) announcement is welcome news for rail services in Wales. It confirms that electrification throughout the South Wales mainline from the Severn Tunnel to Swansea will be delivered, along with the electrification of the Valley Line routes, including Ebbw Vale, the Vale of Glamorgan and Maesteg.

The HLOS does not mandate how the strategic outputs should be delivered, although it provides an illustrative example of how these could be achieved and through the Statement of Available Funds (SoFA) confirms the level of funding available to deliver the outputs. The HLOS requirements are therefore for the delivery of a number of specified schemes and achievement of metrics relating to safety, to capacity into London and key urban centres (including Cardiff), to reliability and to the environment.

The rail industry is currently working on a response to the HLOS which will be published in early January 2013 in the Industry Strategic Business Plan (ISBP). This will set out the long term vision for rail, how industry proposes to deliver the HLOS requirements, market sector strategies and industry affordability analysis. In addition Network Rail will also produce its own Strategic Business Plan (SBP) setting out how it proposes to deliver its obligations and the funding required for the five years from April 2014 to 2019. The ISBPs and SBP will complement each other.

Integration of rail services with other modes is a vital part of providing a sustainable, value for money transport network and whilst the ISBP will not deal directly with the integration of rail services, it will demonstrate how the industry will deliver the outputs that Government has asked for within available funds, during that period. For example, the confirmation of electrification will enable the new Great Western franchisee to provide through services from London to Swansea with wholly electric trains, delivering significant passenger benefits. Maintaining these through journeys is a vital element of rail services within Wales.

The HLOS, coupled with new franchises will enable numerous beneficial implications for services that currently operate. In addition to the environmental benefits, the electrification schemes will deliver improvements in reliability and performance across the route and will improve journey times through the improved acceleration of electric rolling stock. The combination of this scheme with the introduction of new high-speed trains through the InterCity Express Programme represents an opportunity for faster train services both within Wales and between Wales and England. The Department for Transport, in its statement announcing the scheme, stated that journey times to South Wales from London could be reduced by as much as 19 minutes.

- **What examples of good practice in public transport integration can be identified within Wales, more widely within the UK and internationally?**

As this response has identified, integration takes a great many forms and there are good examples throughout the bus and rail industries. This is a very wide ranging question and many pages could be filled with examples, but here are a few high profile ones.

Almost 300 stations across the UK now benefit from PlusBus integrated rail and bus ticketing which provides onwards bus travel from rail stations. This includes all major stations in Wales.

Integrated travelcards affording unlimited bus and rail travel are available covering Greater Bristol, Cornwall, Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, Merseyside. Similar bus-only products are available in (inter alia) Chester, Leicester, Hampshire, Northampton, Norwich, as well as the areas identified above.

Other locally specific examples of good practice include:

- *The Luton Airport Parkway integrated bus service, Heathrow RailAir Link coach service*
- *First Great Western 'Train Times' booklets include a three page chapter about getting to and from the Train station which gives details of bus, cycle and parking facilities.*
- *South West Trains produce a leaflet promoting connecting services, such as Airport Links.*
- *The Southeastern and First Capital Connect Network maps show the PLUSBUS icon beside all stations that are PLUSBUS interchanges.*
- *All First Bus timetables show the national rail symbol beside rail station timing points.*
- *Traveline Cymru provides nation-wide public transport enquiry service for both bus and train travel, along with an sms text alert service for bus stops.*

Further examples can be found by following the link:

<http://www.journeysolutions.com/sites/default/files/documents/Door-to-door%20report%20June%202009%20Final.pdf>

John Birtwistle

Projects Director UK Bus

FirstGroup plc