

# CAROLYN THOMAS

## MS FOR NORTH WALES / AS DROS GOGLEDD CYMRU

Jack Sargeant MS

Chair, Senedd Petitions Committee

Sent by email only.

Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> April 2024

### Public Bus Transport

Dear Jack,

Thank you for inviting me to contribute regarding public bus transport.

Public transport is a lifeline for many, ensuring that nobody is left behind. It is a social issue as well as maintaining access to work, education, and services. I know in rural areas; the bus journey is when regular passengers enjoy a social chat with each other and the driver.

Public Transport employs large numbers of people and impacts on every area of the Government, access to education, jobs, culture, tourism, economy and medical appointments.

We have heard at the culture and sports committee that public transport is essential to ensure fair access to swimming pools and sports clubs. Access to medical appointments is one of the biggest concerns for residents, especially older people.

Delivering public bus transport is expensive, it needs to integrate with school transport to help subsidise the journeys for the rest of the day, this already happens in North Wales. I am aware the Learner Traveller measure is being reviewed but we need to understand the cost and resource issue. When I was Cabinet member, 3 years ago, we used to estimate the cost of transporting a child was approximately £700 a year, this has increased significantly because of inflationary pressures.

At the local government and housing committee, the leader of the WLGA spoke about the daily issue of ensuring there are enough operators to fulfil all the school transport contracts and make sure no school child is left behind. There has also been a 40% price increase creating a massive budget pressure.

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I have always been concerned that CJs will be able to deliver transport, so need some caution, time and resources. Bus transport is hugely complex, one authority has 450 contracts, 350 are school and officers have good daily communication with operators, helping them to maintain services when they may be about to collapse, or ask them to step in last minute when needed. Accountability is important, ensuring that no child or vulnerable adult is left behind. Operators are concerned that TfW will be delivering bus transport, they are used to dealing directly with the local authorities and have built a good relationship.

Procurement of buses (capital expenditure) is expensive at £350k, to £450k and a service could cost £350 to £700k to run, if journeys are not commercial then they stop. Councils have stepped in with subsidies but many authorities have withdrawn these over the last few years of austerity, and I am aware more have put them on the table as cost savings which may mean more services will be terminated.

If Welsh Government through Transport for Wales could help with procurement using scale of purchase it may help with sustainability for operators and local authorities or CJs commissioning services.

Residents like a scheduled bus service but many are having to accept change and move to a bookable Flecsi service which has been commissioned by TfW and is heavily subsidised by Welsh Government but is very welcome.

Reliability and clear timetabling is important to encourage people to use public transport and have faith in a service. One bad experience can put them off altogether. One bus timetable change by an operator can mean that 150 bus stops must be updated, it is labour intensive and falls to local authorities who do not have resources.

The Traveline app is good, google also provides reliable information these days regarding nearest bus stop and bus number. Bus operators will also provide information if people know the operator and can phone up.

A friendly, helpful bus driver and rail platform assistant is invaluable and make all the difference between people having confidence to use public transport especially if they have any physical or mental difficulties.

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Recruitment and retention of drivers is an issue, Arriva Wales pays drivers less in Wales which is unfair and causes an issue as they cross border and pass colleagues on different pay daily. Many drivers are being lost to operators that provide excursions and holidays which is a growing industry.

If local authorities were able to get an operator's licence, then their Streetscene/waste driver operatives could maybe get a special licence and training to become bus drivers and fill in gaps left behind by operators. However, many local authorities are currently reluctant to take on more responsibility because of lack of resources.

Integrated fares that can be used across operators is important as is maintaining cross border transport.

Regarding capped fares and free fares, feedback is that capped fares do encourage more use (eg in RCT) and if people pay a nominal £1 or £2 fee rather than free, it is valued more, there has also been some antisocial behaviour when it has been free. Some areas in England have not benefited from increased patronage where there have been capped fares.

Targeted interventions could be useful. I would like to propose a scheme where residents of new developments get a free bus pass for one year using 106 funding, this has happened in a new development in Chester.

Many over 60 concessionary passes are not being used, and there has been a fall in usage since COVID. With the help of the older persons commissioner, Age Cymru, local authorities and other organisations, there could a targeted campaign to provide information providing information to give confidence.

Transport Focus and CPT would be keen to see a campaign for younger people. In Scotland, under 22s can access free bus travel. Feedback is this has caused some issue with antisocial behaviour and could get mixed up with school transport (learner traveller measure). There is currently the MyTravelPass in Wales that offers a 30% discount. This should be promoted more.

Public bus transport is highly subsidised and WG has provided over £200m funding support to maintain bus services across Wales. Since the pandemic less people are now using bus services. The last emergency funding has come to an end, and I welcome from 1<sup>st</sup> April this year Welsh Government have introduced the replacement Bus Network Grant (BNG).

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It is in addition to the £25m Bus Services Support Grant (BSSG). The BNG will provide local authorities across Wales with £39m to secure bus services that they deem socially necessary that the commercial market will not provide when Bus Transition Fund (BTF) comes to an end. The new scheme will include specific conditions that will encourage improved regional co-ordination of bus services; network ticketing and the need to ensure accurate and up to date information about the bus services provided.

BNG will bring about stability to the industry as well as increased public control of bus services. It will also act as a bridge from the emergency funding that has been provided to bus franchising. BNG will be a twelve-month scheme. From 1 April 2025 Welsh Government said they will aim to introduce one scheme that will replace BNG and BSSG.

I welcome the reform of public transport towards one network, one timetable, one ticket. Operators were concerned regarding franchising, but they now welcome it. I am concerned that it will be very expensive to deliver and hope there will be funding to deliver it.

Once again, thank you for requesting my input, and if I can be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Yours sincerely,



Carolyn Thomas

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