

William Powell AM
Chair, Petitions Committee

31 July 2013

Dear William

Petition P-04-475 - Buses for Meirionnydd

Thank you for your letter (reference P-04-475) regarding the petition received from Barbara Snowball.

We are pleased to provide our views in relation to the petition and the provision of bus services in Wales, and have incorporated views from our local partner covering Meirionnydd, Age Cymru Gwynedd a Môn.

We support the views raised in the petition over the importance of local bus services to many older people, and the fact that insufficient transport links can restrict people's access to key services such as healthcare.

Age Cymru Gwynedd a Môn informs us that they have received several complaints in respect of the reduction of bus services in Meirionnydd and have discussed these with the local authority. We understand that the reduction followed a change of operator which led to a number of routes being changed or discontinued for economic reasons.

A major concern locally is the consequential reduction in access to health services. For example, people needing to travel from Dolgellau to Wrexham for hospital treatment only have the option of one service which departs in the morning and returns at 2pm. Therefore people cannot use bus services to return home after afternoon appointments or visits. In addition, once the bus returns to Dolgellau there is no onward connection at that time of day to areas such as Tywyn, Barmouth or Aberdovey. This makes attending hospital appointments extremely difficult for people in these areas who rely on public transport. We understand that the situation is similar on the Llŷn peninsular where there is no public transport from Pwllheli to outlying villages after 6pm.

The national position

Age Cymru recently commissioned research into older people's use of bus services, the adequacy of current service provision and the impact of recent Welsh Government changes to grant programmes for local bus services and community transport. This research will be

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Ygrym newydd sy'n cyfuno
The new force combining

The logo for Age Concern Cymru features the word 'AGE' in a large, bold, blue font, with 'Concern' in a smaller, red, cursive font below it, and 'Cymru' in a blue, sans-serif font to the right.

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published in the autumn and we would be pleased to provide a copy to the Committee.

This research found that while older people were often satisfied with daytime bus services in urban areas, there were significant concerns about the poor frequency of daytime services in rural areas, and services in the evenings and on Sundays in all areas. Concerns about reliability, waiting facilities and access to information (such as timetables) were also raised.

In our view there is a significant challenge for the Welsh Government and Regional Transport Consortia to improve the provision of services, especially in rural areas. The Regional Transport Services Grant plays a key role in the provision of these services, however the consequences for older people of the loss of services as a result of funding cuts is a serious concern.

The aims of the new Regional Transport Services Grant are laudable. However the combination of the two previous schemes – the Local Transport Services Grant (LTSG) and Bus Services Operator Grant (BSOG) – has also resulted in a significant reduction in funding. Our research found that the combined value of these grants has fallen by 22 percent between 2011-12 and 2013-14¹.

It is not clear what impact this change will have on evening, weekend and rural provision. While the Regional Transport Consortia are optimistic that it will result in better quality and integrated services, this has to be off-set against the drop in funding. In particular, the response of bus operators to the reduction in and possible loss of rebate for fuel costs is unknown and could have consequences for marginal services.

The Welsh Government's National Travel Plan recognises the importance of good bus services. However, as the Assembly Enterprise and Business Committee has noted, beyond the provision of the Concessionary Fares Initiative the Welsh Government has done very little to improve bus services in recent years². Indeed, its main action has been to peg and then cut funding for non-commercial bus services.

We believe that the Welsh Government should require Regional Transport Consortia, as a condition of their funding, to include consultation with older people, including disabled older people, in the preparation of their strategies.

Without steps to improve the frequency, reliability and accessibility of bus services throughout Wales, more and more older people will be unable to reach essential services.

¹ Age Cymru, Older People's Experience of Bus Services in Wales (to be published September 2013)

² National Assembly for Wales Enterprise and Business Committee (2013), Integrated Public Transport in Wales. Available at: <http://www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-business-fourth-assembly-laid-docs.htm?act=dis&id=246495&ds=5/2013>

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The logo for 'HELP THE AGED WE WILL' features the text 'HELP THE AGED' in a bold, black, sans-serif font, followed by 'WE WILL' in a bold, yellow, sans-serif font, all contained within a black rectangular border.
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Not only will their well-being suffer but there are significant consequences for other services, notably health and social care services, which will have to cope with older people's isolation.

We fear that unless the Welsh Government look at this issue quickly, the situation will only get worse and will potentially enter a downward spiral. Fewer people will use the buses because of poor connections or infrequent services, which will in turn lead to further reduction in services

We would welcome any recommendations that the Committee can make in relation to improving the provision of bus services, both in Meirionnydd and more generally across Wales, and would be happy to provide more information as required.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Graeme Francis'.

Graeme Francis
Head of Policy and Public Affairs

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