

Written Response by the Welsh Government to the report of the Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee entitled Taming the traffic: The Impact of Congestion on Bus Services

Congestion already affects the economy, environment and health of the people of Wales. If left unchecked, and we recognise that demand forecasts indicate that road use will continue to grow, those effects will only worsen. That is why tackling congestion is a priority focus for Welsh Government. It is integral to the Wales Transport Strategy and the National Transport Finance Plan.

We have already put in place a range of measures to help tackle congestion and to help improve the punctuality of bus services, for example, to enable local authorities to adopt powers to tackle parking, bus lane and moving traffic contraventions.

Congestion will be specifically discussed during workshops with our partners later this year following on from the very successful first Wales Bus Summit in Wrexham.

In addition, I have announced a series of pinch-point programmes, including one for the motorway and trunk road network, and one for the local road network. Our transport network needs to be sustainable and that is why the pinch-point studies are designed to look at a range of solutions to congestion problems from public transport to active travel.

I welcome the Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee report and a detailed response is overleaf.

Detailed Responses to the report's recommendations are set out below:

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that:

As a matter of urgency, the Welsh Government should develop and publish an action plan to set out how it will tackle the impacts of traffic congestion on the bus industry in Wales. The plan should include:

1. Recognition of the scale and extent of the impacts of congestion on the bus industry in Wales, and a firm commitment to tackling the issue.
2. Clear strategic direction for highway authorities and bus operators on the action needed to address the impacts of congestion on bus services.
3. Details of the Minister's commitment to undertake further work to understand the root causes of the issue, encompassing both urban and rural areas. This knowledge should be used to shape the required solutions.
4. How Welsh Government will support local authorities to work in partnership with bus operators to develop and implement bus priority measures, including changes to funding to ensure long term, sustainable solutions.
5. Welsh Government's requirements for bus operators to be more transparent and open about their revenues as a condition of receiving support under the Bus Services Support Grant.
6. Guidance for local authorities on how to establish and maximise the effectiveness of bus quality partnership schemes. Suggestions as to how local authorities can work in a cross-boundary way, using new and existing mechanisms including local and regional planning, to ensure congestion impacting bus services is tackled on a regional basis.
7. Assessment of the full range of tools available and how useful they might be in tackling congestion's impact on Welsh bus services, including: implementation of park and ride schemes, congestion charging, enhanced parking charges, workplace parking levies, and bus priority measures.
8. Plans for a national awareness raising campaign to encourage a modal shift in transport choices in both urban and rural areas, recognising the unique challenges presented by different settings. This must sell the benefits of travelling by bus where this is a viable transport option. Encouraging people out of their cars and onto the bus is a crucial step in providing a sustainable, high quality, reliable bus service for current and future generations.

Consideration

- 1 Recognition of the scale and extent of the impacts of congestion on the bus industry in Wales, and a firm commitment to tackling the issue.

Response: Accept

We recognise the detrimental effects that traffic congestion has on the reliability and punctuality of bus services. In turn, those effects discourage existing bus passengers from continuing to use the bus, and discourage new bus passengers from trying the bus. We are committed to improving bus services in Wales and will undertake further work to ensure the scale and extent of impacts are known. The development of the Next Wales Transport Strategy will include consideration of this issue.

Registered bus services have declined from 1,943 services in March 2005 to 1,058 in March 2015 (Traffic Commissioner reports), with the number of bus passenger journeys declining by around 19% between 2008 and 2015. Whilst these trends cannot solely be attributed to traffic congestion, we recognise the average bus speeds have been reducing. For example Stagecoach submitted evidence to the committee indicating bus speeds have reduced by 2mph between 1995 and 2015, requiring additional vehicles to maintain service levels.

In recognition of these trends, The Welsh Government allocates significant revenue funding to support the bus network in Wales. In the current financial year, local authorities will distribute £25m allocated to them under the Bus Services Support Grant scheme, to help them subsidise bus and community transport services that are not being provided commercially.

The Welsh Government recognises the opportunity to reduce the impact of congestion through the provision of appropriate infrastructure and commits a significant element of capital funding for this purpose including

- Local Transport Fund includes measures to assist the flow of buses.
- Local Transport Network Fund (total £2.8m this financial year) for improvements to the network., including bus specific measures
- Pinch-point removal funding (£48m multi-year package) to address congestion on the network, including buses.

Financial Implications – None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

Consideration

- 2 Clear strategic direction for highway authorities and bus operators on the action needed to address the impacts of congestion on bus services.

Response: Accept

With the exception of the Trunk Road Network, Local Authorities are the responsible Highway Authority; however the Welsh Government works closely

with Local Authorities and provides strategic direction through Policy development and funding conditions.

The development of a new Wales Transport Strategy provides an opportunity to strengthen the importance of congestion mitigation in the Welsh bus network. The completion of this document is anticipated in 2019.

The guidance for the Local Transport Fund includes objectives to improve connectivity through sustainable and resilient infrastructure. Successful applications meeting these requirements included the following schemes in:

- Caerphilly to reduce congestion at Pwyllypant Roundabout, which is the confluence of strategic bus routes
- Cardiff for junction improvements on the Eastern Bus Corridor at Fitzalan Place/Newport Rd Junction
- Carmarthenshire for infrastructure improvements at the town centre junction on A483 trunk road to address congestion issues
- Flintshire to improve bus facilities and operation in the Shotton corridor
- Neath Port Talbot Improvements to the priority bus corridors between Port Talbot and Margam
- Pembrokeshire for Fishguard Town Centre Access Improvements. Highway improvements to improve traffic flow on the trunk roads

Local (highway) authorities have discretionary powers available to them to help tackle traffic congestion – specifically, parking, bus lane and moving traffic contraventions. To date, only Cardiff Council has applied for and adopted these powers to tackle all such contraventions, although the majority of local (highway) authorities have adopted powers to tackle parking contraventions, that can impinge on the flow of traffic..

We will write to all Local Authorities within the next month to highlight these initiatives

Financial Implications – None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

Consideration

- 3 Details of the Minister's commitment to undertake further work to understand the root cause of the issue, encompassing both urban and rural areas. This knowledge should be used to shape the required solutions.

Response: Accept

In recognition of the Committee's recommendation that there should be further work to understand the root cause of congestion, our partners – including local authorities and the bus industry – will be asked to report and explain what are the root causes in their own areas ahead of the series of workshops which are planned for Autumn 2017. This will enable summaries to be

produced during the workshops for urban and rural areas, along with recommendations for tackling congestion in those different environments.

The Autumn 2017 workshops are being held at 4 diverse venues across Wales to ensure the particular challenges caused by traffic congestion in urban and rural areas are considered. The workshops will also include activities to identify specific solutions, drawing upon local (highway) authorities' and bus operators' experiences.

The outputs from the workshop will inform future policies and actions to address congestion.

Financial Implications – None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

Consideration

- 4 How Welsh Government will support local authorities to work in partnership with bus operators to develop and implement bus priority measures, including changes to funding to ensure long term, sustainable solutions.

Response: Accept

Transport for Wales has recently established an Integration Alliance Board (IAB) for the South Wales Metro area, which brings together representatives from the Welsh Government, Local Authorities, Bus operators and User Groups to facilitate closer working arrangements. This model could be rolled out on a wider basis. The IAB has identified a number of work streams, including the identification and development of strategic bus corridors. This will provide a 'showcase' for bus travel in Wales, including opportunities to facilitate greater service reliability.

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Infrastructure announced a 5-point plan to support the Bus industry in Wales in August 2016. This included funding for Local Authorities to appoint bus coordinators in North and South Wales. Their remit includes promotion of closer working between stakeholders to develop quality bus partnerships.

The Welsh Government is also considering opportunities to better co-ordinate allocations of funding from the Local Transport (capital) Fund and the Bus Services Support Grant (revenue). The aim is to encourage a targeted approach to investment by public authorities maximise the beneficial impacts. For example route or corridor service enhancements would be supported by associated infrastructure – such as bus priority measures. This approach will

This aim is consistent with a broader approach that is being considered, in which all Bus Services Support Grant could be allocated only in support of bus services which formed part of a Quality Bus Partnership between local authorities and operators (voluntary or statutory).

Once the work to better co-ordinate allocations under the Bus Services Support Grant and the Local Transport Fund has been completed, updated guidance will be issued.

Financial Implications – None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

Consideration

- 5 Welsh Government's requirements for bus operators to be more transparent and open about their revenues as a condition of receiving support under the Bus Services Support Grant.

Response: Accept

Bus operators will be understandably concerned to ensure that commercially sensitive information about their services is protected, which is helped by minimising the number of organisations or levels which would have access to this data.

As local authorities administer Bus Services Support Grant, we will therefore require local authorities from 1 April 2018 to establish the revenue predicted to accrue to an operator from each route for which that operator has sought Bus Services Support Grant.

Financial Implications – None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

Consideration

- 6 Guidance to local authorities on how to establish and maximise the effectiveness of bus quality partnership schemes. Suggestions as to how local authorities can work in a cross-boundary way, using new and existing mechanisms including local and regional planning, to ensure congestion impacting bus services is tackled on a regional basis.

Response: Accept

The Welsh Government has already issued detailed guidance to local authorities encouraging them to consider more and closer partnership working with bus operators, and with neighbouring local authorities. There is specific, detailed guidance about voluntary and statutory bus Quality Partnership Schemes, and further guidance was issued following the better co-ordination projects that the Welsh Government funded during 2014-15 in the Vale of Glamorgan and Ceredigion.

Building upon these existing documents and guidance, and practice, this autumn's planned workshops will identify what barriers may still be preventing local authorities from making voluntary and/or statutory partnerships with bus

operators, and more and closer partnerships with their neighbours. Attendees will also be reminded of the existence of the guidance already in place.

Financial Implications – None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

Consideration

- 7 Assessment of the full range of tools available and how useful they might be in tackling congestion's impact on Welsh bus services, including: implementation of park and ride schemes, congestion charging, enhanced parking charges, workplace parking levies, and bus priority measures.

Response: Accept

These specific points will be picked up during the workshops planned for autumn 2017. As part of the work undertaken by the Bus Policy Advisory Group, advice to local authorities and bus operators prepared by transport consultants the TAS Partnership was published in 2015. This guidance already provides useful advice on funded interventions that can have a positive impact on the delivery of local bus services.

We will circulate links to this document to Local Authorities.

Financial Implications – None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

Consideration

- 8 Plans for a national awareness raising campaign to encourage a modal shift in transport choices in both urban and rural areas, recognising the unique challenges presented by different settings. This must sell the benefits of travelling by bus where this is a viable transport option. Encouraging people out of their cars and onto the bus is a crucial step in providing a sustainable, high quality, reliable bus service for current and future generations.

Response: Accept

Reflecting their direct and commercial interest, we will seek from the bus industry proposals for a Wales-wide marketing campaign to highlight the attractive benefits of today's bus network, and will contribute to its cost, to be matched by the bus industry.

The Welsh Government is undertaking a pilot offering free weekend travel on TrawsCymru services that will give us a strong evidence base from which to objectively assess the impact of free travel on:

- The propensity of current, non or occasional public transport passengers to make more journeys by TrawsCymru and other local bus

services outside the time periods of the trial, and whether the trial stimulates any sustained modal shift over the longer term;

- Modal choice within rural areas where good public transport services are provided on key routes; and
- The wider economic impact on rural communities and businesses from increased spending on local goods and services by people travelling on free public transport as part of the trial.
- The impact of reduced dwell time on journey time given the removal of the time penalty associated with the collection of fares.

The trial will also help to raise awareness of the TrawsCymru network, encourage people to sample its services for free, generate fare paying passenger growth on TrawsCymru services during weekdays, and strengthen the good will and satisfaction with services among existing users of the network by including them in a free travel event.

The pilot commenced in July 2017; therefore there is limited data currently available to identify the impact of the scheme at this stage. Welsh Government is procuring an independent review of the pilot and will publish its findings once complete. These will inform future activities that promote bus services in Wales.

Financial Implications – None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

Ken Skates AM
Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Infrastructure