

Responses to the Review of Public Transport in Wales

Observations offered by Professor Austin Smyth Transport Research Institute Edinburgh

The Transport Research Institute, Napier University is grateful for the opportunity to offer comments on the Policy Review of Public Transport drawn up by the Environment Planning and Transport Committee, The National Assembly for Wales. We would be happy to develop our observations on experience with examples of alternative structures both within the UK and abroad, in discussion with the Committee.

This Policy Review of Public Transport reflects the increased profile which transport issues have attracted throughout the UK over the last four to five years but also the disappointment widely felt in translating laudable rhetoric into real improvements on the ground. Moreover, the fragmented nature of the public transport sector has been the source of much concern in attempting to realise the full potential of the system.

The review includes is based on a number of discrete sections. It includes a variety of statistics with a standard breakdown:

- Journeys per person year
- By mode 8% Non Car / Walk
- Mode of travel to work 74% Car
- Comparison of amount of travel per person
- Mode descriptions, concentrated on bus
- Review of the amount of travel, costs and trends by the individual modes.

It notes most bus users are less likely to be car owners than with other public transport modes. Conclusions relating to the availability of cars to bus users, disability and age as particular reason for using non car modes are provided. Reference is made to the impacts of Disability Discrimination

Act. It then goes on to provide a review of the role of the Assembly and the role of local authorities. It notes the statutory roles granted to the Welsh Assembly under the Wales Act, and subsequently under the Transport Act 2000. The National assembly has responsibility for:

- Concessionary Fares
- Funding the local authorities infrastructure through the infrastructure grant.

It also provides a review of existing structures by Welsh region, the existing organizations, involved in the delivery of transport services; and in particular the voluntary organizations involved. The summary also includes a number of consortia of organizations mainly authorities, eg. SWIFT, six authorities including Bridgend. Alternative organisational structures are considered. These include a review of the role of the Welsh Assembly in the delivery of a wider range of services. A strong case is made for leadership at an all Wales level.

The document sets out a Transport Framework and a vision for developing a national [Welsh] approach to integrated transport. The review highlights Roads represent 83% of the total local authority budget – Public Passenger Transport 8%. The Vision as set out in the document offers an outline programme of investment and key projects. The Vision is set out in terms of: 10 year objectives and generally making services more attractive (no time period). The review defines quality as being: time, frequency, reliability, rolling stock age and appearance, accessibility of vehicles, personal security. It also sets out the potential elements of quality management and quality transport routes. Impressing the importance of achieving recognized quality standards – such as the ‘kite mark’. Monitoring and evaluation would involve an agreed evaluation programme, a dataset of what works in Wales while passengers would also be involved in the evaluation.

The Welsh Assembly review has also recognised the current limitations in its ability to effect change, reflecting the distribution of power between the Assembly and Westminster and between local government, the Assembly and U.K. government. Unlike Scotland or Northern Ireland the Assembly has much more restricted statutory responsibility and executive authority in the transport sector. For instance, Scotland and Northern Ireland enjoy autonomy over road infrastructure spend while Northern Ireland has fully authority over the region’s rail network and, given the fact that all public transport is state owned and fully regulated, almost complete power to determine policy implementation as well as broad strategy principles.

The review sets out a vision for public transport which emphasises the 1998 UK White Paper sentiments. The underlying theme in the review is promotion of integrated transport. An immediate difficulty lies in relation to power and or influence over rail services. Essentially the Welsh Assembly has little say in the development of rail services in the principality although anticipated reform of TOC operating boundaries does go some way to addressing the mismatch between the spatial structure of the passenger rail business and the travel needs and patterns of importance to Wales.

The push for quality is laudable while the kite mark concept at least attempts to draw attention to best or worst practice. The review examines a number of voluntary arrangements in the delivery of public transport in Wales but identifies a requirement for further work to establish the impacts of widespread use of existing arrangements. The factual analysis of alternative models is simply that - factual. and offers little insight into the practicalities of as well as advantages and disadvantages of a variety of very different models currently in use in other parts of the UK. The review does offer an assessment of selected alternatives for Wales, including an all Wales PTA a regional PTA and enhancement of existing partnership arrangements. This review however relates to structures not delivery or workings.

The section dealing with monitoring and evaluation is pertinent and does point the way to some badging of quality. It is noteworthy in this regard that the public sector has been subject to such concepts for many years. For instance, in Northern Ireland all rail and bus services are monitored and passengers satisfaction levels published by company and route sector. Chartermarks are awarded for specific examples of good practice while the operator is required to compensate bus and rail passengers for poor performance.

The Welsh Assembly's role is essentially through guidance to local authorities in their production of local transport plans as led down by Westminster. Its importance is underpinned by control over local authority infrastructure spend and revenue support for concessionary fares. We do however believe that geography and other background considerations, in addition to existing GB regulatory and control frameworks, will conspire to severely constrain the Assembly's ability to realise its modal split targets for both passenger and freight. Moreover the structure of the public transport industry as well as current regulatory arrangements limit the influence local authorities can have over operators in their area.

We concur with the view expressed by the Assembly that the challenge of reversing the decline in public transport patronage overall requires more concentrated action through a partnership between operators, local authorities and the National Assembly (Chapter 2 p.11) Addressing the challenges posed in the Chapter on Vision and Quality requires more specific inputs than those set out on p20. The potential for formation of enlarged consortia of authorities to improve the effectiveness of policy is worthy of merit although here again much more detail is required if the concept is to be turned into effectively delivery of the Assembly's vision for Welsh public transport.

The concept of a Welsh PTA has considerable attraction although advice on a model for a Scottish Highland and Islands authority came down against such a structure for the Scottish Highlands. An argument exists for a Welsh PTA as addressing the imbalances between North and South Wales. A model that is specifically designed to meet the needs of the entirety of Wales could follow that outlined by the Welsh Transport Advisory group in 1999.

Wales is also probably too small to sustain two authorities, one for the South east and one for the remainder of the country. A regional PTA could also have adverse consequences for more rural

areas. A Welsh PTA would also have to achieve authority over Welsh railways, something which the Scottish Executive, while managing the flow of funds for Scottish railways and thus increasingly visible as responsible for overall funding of Scottish railways, has thus far failed to achieve.

Nevertheless the Scottish model has advantages over existing Welsh arrangements in relation to railways and road infrastructure. However the bus industry in Scotland remains fragmented and the country is too large for an all Scotland PTA/PTE. It is also important to recognise that inter regional or local authority rivalries will tend to limit room for coordination in the absence of centralised powers for such activities as revenue allocation responsibilities. Moreover, in relation to railways the limited authority enjoyed by the Scottish Executive, as distinct from an increasing responsibility, does point to increasing tensions in the future as spending constraints tend to bite most strongly on schemes intended to improve or simply maintain large loss making routes, so typical of Scotland and Wales.

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