



north wales economic ambition board
bwrdd uchelgais economaidd gogledd cymru

REPORT TO TRANSPORT DELIVERY SUB-GROUP

02 DECEMBER 2019

Title: REGIONAL BUS UPDATES – NOVEMBER 2019
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[PETER DANIELS] – DENBIGHSHIRE COUNCIL

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To update members on the current situation regarding Public Service Vehicle Accessibility Regulations (PSVAR) and free concessionary travel renewal.

2. Decision Sought

- 2.2. The Transport Delivery Sub-Group is asked to consider the current situation, question the regional officers as necessary, to offer comments and for free travel, to note for information, and for learner transport [PSVAR] to consider what additional action the Sub-group may wish to take.

3. Background and Relevant Considerations

PSVAR

- 3.1 Members will recall that, from January 2020, the Public Service Vehicle Accessibility Regulations (2000) (PSVAR) apply to any and all closed learner transport contracts where parents make a contribution towards the cost of transport. Under the PSVAR, coaches used in such circumstances will, inter alia, henceforth need to be fully accessible.
- 3.2 On November 21st, 2019, councils received a letter from the Department for Transport (DfT) explaining the process by which authorities might apply for an extension to the PSVAR process. Subject to meeting specified criteria, the DfT would certify individual vehicles to exempt them from the requirements till December 2021. Thereafter, there is an implication that a further extension may apply effectively to up to half of the learner transport fleet till December 2023.
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- 3.3 While officers welcome these arrangements, there are a number of issues, specifically that the DfT is offering no derogation for learner transport. Also of concern is that the exemption applies only where no more than 20 per cent of seats on a coach is sold (rather than used for eligible learners or left vacant). Some school and most college services have more than 20 per cent of seats sold and this requirement would mean that authorities would be unable to make a charge in such circumstances, unless the vehicle was fully compliant with the PSVAR. This raises questions of equity.
- 3.4 A third concern continues to be that the available second hand pool of accessible vehicles will still unlikely be sufficient to transform the school transport fleet across Britain, even by December 2023. Investment on the scale required will have implications not only for authorities but also for small family businesses.
- 3.5 In order to comply with the DfT's requests, officers in each authority are currently undergoing a fairly bureaucratic process of amassing the DfT's required exemption information by the deadline of December 13th. This involves the goodwill of individual contractors. Failure to receive the necessary certification will result in specific vehicles not being able to carry those learners whose parents have paid. The deadline is tight.

FREE CONCESSIONARY TRAVEL RENEWAL UPDATE

- 3.6 The pressure caused by the volume of applicants appears to have dissipated somewhat, albeit replaced in some authorities by previous applicants presenting their documents for verification, following individual requests to do so by TfW. There is also a number who call in to ask when they might expect their new pass. Where these are happening, this continues to be at a cost to other services as provided by contact centre staff. TfW had provided some much-needed temporary staffing support to some authorities but this has now finished.
- 3.7 Practitioners were anticipating a renewed bow wave from towards the end of October 2019 at the start of TfW's media campaign. That has yet to materialise fully. Many active users already appear to have renewed during the September/early October "panic".
- 3.8 As at November 12th, 2019, the percentage of applications across the region for active users (who have journeyed at least six times in the last three months) was as follows:

Conwy	71%
Denbighshire	64%
Flintshire	71%
Gwynedd	65%
Isle of Anglesey	63%
Wrexham	70%
Best in Wales to date	78%
Worst in Wales to date	46%
Mean	68%

- 3.9 These data may be skewed if not all deceased cardholders have previously been removed from the database.
- 3.10 These percentages are for those who have gone through the reapplication process but they do not necessarily reflect the number of people who have verified their details or have received their passes. The time it takes for an applicant to get their bus pass is variable, with some having applied in September still waiting, while others have received theirs. TfW is currently prioritising the despatch of passes.
- 3.11 There remains some significant work to do if we are to reach 100 per cent of active travellers by the December 31st 2019 cut-off. The possibility of a pre-Christmas postal workers' strike is now remote but there remain the usual seasonal postal delays. Realistically, people who have not applied by mid-December may be at risk of not receiving their pass, added to which those who need to enquire about the renewal process or receive support from contact staff will likely find their local contact centres closed after Christmas Eve. There is some debate about whether and for how long any grace period may be offered to those with an old-style pass. Such an extension is inevitable but this will have clear implications of free travel budgets, as it will rely on drivers manually entering information, something for obvious reasons everyone in Wales is keen to minimise.
- 3.12 Updates and communications from TfW are now rare, with the last being some three weeks ago. On the one hand, this is positive that there is less to report. On the other, authorities were, for example, unaware that they might expect to have to deal with a subsequent face-to-face verification process (for some applicants who had seemingly been successful). Neither has TfW staff been able to meet with practitioners. Council staff across the region remain unable to answer all the questions from applicants and this can result in practitioners looking uninformed.

- 3.13 Meanwhile, post-January 2020, although the agreement between each authority and TfW expires, the Welsh Government is seeking an extension in its current form to March 31st, 2020 to ensure both certainty and continuity.

4. Financial Implications

- 4.1 The implications regarding PSVR including any reduction in income from parents are for individual authorities in the current and future years and not for the Economic Ambition Board.
- 4.2 Apart from any short-term consequences for individual authority staffing budgets in supporting TfW in the re-application process, it is felt that any on-going financial implications will fall on the Welsh Government, which reimburses local authorities for free travel journeys undertaken.

STATUTORY OFFICERS RESPONSE:

i. **Monitoring Officer – responsible body:**

As noted in the report an element of uncertainty remains in relation to the situation and the work required to take advantage of any exception is highlighted.

ii. **Head of Finance – responsible body:**

I confirm that part 4 of this report accurately explains the financial implications.