



north wales economic ambition board
bwrdd uchelgais economaidd gogledd cymru

REPORT TO TRANSPORT DELIVERY SUB-GROUP

JULY 30th 2021

Title: REGIONAL BUS ISSUES
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1. Purpose of the Report

To consider the impact of the health emergency on bus services over the previous 18 months and the extent to which the region may continue to work more closely in the future.

2. Decision Sought

The Transport Delivery Sub-group is asked to consider what additional steps the Sub-group may wish to take, potentially for its September 2021 meeting.

3. Background and Relevant Considerations

LOCAL BUS SERVICES

- 3.1. Members will be familiar with the issues faced by bus operators during the pandemic and the response. In summary, there have been periods when bus operators were required to carry those travelling for essential purposes only, during which time passenger numbers fell to about 10 per cent of those who otherwise travel. Recovery in August 2020 was weak and thwarted first by local measures before a national lockdown from December. These were exacerbated by driver shortages, at Arriva in Rhyl and especially Wrexham, where service levels were such that Arriva carried about five per cent of the usual number of passengers.
- 3.2. From April 2021, bus services have been available more generally and passengers along the urban coast and Deeside have returned to about 40 per cent of pre-virus numbers, reaching an average peak of about 70 per cent over the Whitsun holidays and falling to about 60 per cent thereafter. Rural services are generally recovering more slowly and those reliant most on free travellers have been particularly slow. Mileage operated by Arriva is about 80 to 85 per cent and the main constraint preventing improvement will be driver availability, which will cause continued problems throughout the summer. Mileage operated by SMEs tends to
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be closer to 100 per cent, owing to a greater impact of school transport which then results in buses being available between the school peaks and the use of tour drivers in reserve.

NATIONAL & REGIONAL WORKING

3.3. Practitioners have always worked closely but have done so particular throughout the pandemic. The changes required and their immediacy have made seeking full political support difficult, though officers have consulted with their respective lead members. Financial support under the Welsh Government's Bus Emergency Scheme via Transport for Wales has ensured that operators have been able to continue offering acceptable levels of service. Providing this support and managing the funding has placed a significant burden on the lead authority (Flintshire). In addition, during the lengthy discussions on the BES scheme and the network review, Denbighshire officers have been attending national meetings and supporting the coordination of the response to BES and other issues on behalf of the region.

3.4. With that funding and the Welsh Government's desire to assert more control over bus services has come a number of work streams surrounding bus reform and financial management. Against the background of the demands on officers' time in keeping the network going and agreeing service levels within the BES framework, national and regional issues have added pressures that require addressing:

3.5. Llwybr Newydd/Decarbonisation Agenda

These over-arching strategies set the wider position as regards the role of bus services in the longer term. Significant remodelling of bus services, as part of an integrated transport solution will be needed. Developing a compelling vision supported by a delivery plan will be required in the future.

3.6. The Establishment of a 'Reference Network'

The BES scheme proposes moving towards the establishment of a reference network. This is the network being supported by emergency funding and which is designed to be similar to that before the emergency. In essence, it is a step towards developing a proposal for network reform. It does, however, reflect changes planned before the emergency, medium-term sustainability and the availability of drivers. This is likely to prove less controversial.

3.7. North Wales Bus Network Review

Across Wales, TfW has funded a wide-ranging and somewhat radical review by consultants Arup and this is most advanced in the North. Currently, as these remain draft, TfW has asked these not be shared widely. Plans both positive and negative will have some wide-ranging implications for local services and could prove challenging for members in some areas. Within, is the potential for further Fflecsi services. The stakeholder consultation phase and

development of detailed implementation plans will require significant input from members and officers.

3.8. Governance

Allied to the TfW review above is an expectation of change to governance structures across the sector, with implications for operators and not least local authorities. It appears likely that decisions over network design will be undertaken on a regional or sub-regional basis, contributing to a wider network design approach.

3.9. Metro

Though much wider (to include the railway), the Metro project is inexorably linked to bus network review & reform and the governance surrounding the way in which buses operate. Bus networks will need to fully integrate with other modes, provide opportunities for interchange and be geared towards a single ticket/multi-mode approach.

3.10. CJC

The above needs to be seen in the context of the requirement to regionalise under the Local Government & Election Act 2021. Transport will be one of the early service areas to be included in the emerging CJC and consideration of the implications of this on local authority resources will be needed.

3.11. Role of TfW

It is increasingly apparent that it is with TfW rather than local authorities where resources are available. TfW has increased capacity significantly to develop emerging Metro projects and to support the development of a national approach to bus networks. Some of that capacity has been recruited from local authorities, increasing some local pressures at councils.

IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL WORKING

3.12. The individual issues in 3.5 to 3.11 above are in themselves significant. None of them should be seen in isolation and a stronger regional response in terms of how we respond to these issues is now required. Capacity to achieve this is currently limited, but the appointment of a regional transport resource within the NWEAB will provide some improvement.

3.13. TfW has indicated that it wishes to operate in partnership with local authorities. During the emergency, because of the way in which local authorities have had to be reactive to immediate pressures, TfW has been able to drive that agenda. In future, developing priorities for the region should be on the basis of an equal partnership, so that elected members retain their say in local bus networks. This will be even more important as

governance changes take place and as theoretically commercial services remain subject to Welsh Government funding. Increasingly funding and legislation will likely be used to acquire more control over commercial routes.

- 3.14. To do this, the region needs to consider carefully how it structures itself, in order to deliver bus-based public transport. The role of the member group will be vital and may need more frequent meetings to achieve adequate over-sight. Developing the approach will take some time to consider and a report with some detailed proposals will be prepared for the September meeting of the group.
- 3.15. In the meantime, members are asked to support the current approach, where the financial lead authority continues to be Flintshire but where some of the pressing and key operational decisions, while taken in consultation with colleagues, are being supported by another authority (currently Denbighshire).

4. Recommendation

- 4.1. That Members consider the challenging agenda for bus network in the region, and having considered the urgent need for a greater degree of regional working and the pressures the region faces, members be presented with options for capacity and delivery, for their September 2021 meeting; and
- 4.2. That, in the meantime, members authorise officers to continue to work in such a way that they can combat the operational pressures facing authorities.

STATUTORY OFFICERS' RESPONSES:

i. Monitoring Officer – responsible body:

The report highlights the challenges which currently face public Transport and the issues which need to be addressed. It's appropriate therefore that the Sub-Board takes a regional over view in order to form possible recommendations to the appropriate decision bodies in the Councils. It is also timely to note that the creation of Regional Transport Strategy will fall into the remit of the North Wales Corporate Joint Committee as of June 2022. The response to this will form part of wider regional work on establishment of the body.

ii. Head of Finance – responsible body:

Budgetary issues are the responsibility of each individual authority. Currently, TfW BES funding covers additional operational costs. Any additional costs

associated with any changes of structure will need be presented to members at the appropriate time – i.e. September 2021 regional Sub-Board for direction, then to the relevant decision making forum in each individual authority.