Equality of Opportunity Committee

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Inquiry into the Impact of Welsh Government Policy on the Accessibility of Transport Services for Disabled People in Wales – Oral Evidence from the Deputy First Minister and Minister for the Economy and Transport

Introduction


2. It explains how our policy works in the context of how the Welsh Assembly Government discharges its statutory powers and the approach that we take to deliver improved accessibility for disabled people in Wales within the scope of our statutory powers.

3. The Welsh Assembly Government has a statutory duty to promote equality, which has led to the development of a distinctive equality agenda in Wales. This agenda requires cooperation and investment from other stakeholders as there is a confluence of interest in ensuring all people to have the opportunity to travel without barriers.

4. The Welsh Assembly Government is keen to promote the equality of opportunity for all people by improving access to all modes of transport. We have only just started on what is a long term programme to work towards this. I welcome this opportunity to provide evidence to the Committee.

5. This paper sets out the position on statutory powers around the provision of public transport services, particularly with regard to rail and bus services.

Statutory responsibilities

6. As outlined in my evidence paper for the Committee’s inquiry into station accessibility, under the Railways Act 2005, certain powers for rail matters in Wales were devolved to Welsh Ministers from the Secretary of State for Transport. Principally they provide that:

   - Co-signatory responsibility for the Wales and Borders franchise, awarded to Arriva Trains Wales (ATW) by the former Strategic Rail Authority in 2003, with a term until December 2018. The Railways Act 2005 provided Welsh Ministers with powers to specify and fund services under the Wales and Borders franchise, currently operated by ATW, within or to and from Wales (“Welsh Services”). There was a Public Expenditure transfer
from the Department of Transport (DfT) to Welsh Assembly Government to meet the cost of the subsidy payable to ATW in respect of Welsh Services.

- Power to invest in rail improvements which benefit Wales. There was no Public Expenditure transfer in respect of these powers and any such investment has been funded by the Welsh Assembly Government’s own Budget.
- A requirement for the Secretary of State to consult Welsh Ministers before letting any other franchises which run into Wales (for example, long distance services to Swansea/west Wales, Holyhead and the Nottingham services).

7. Importantly, the Railways Act 2005 did not devolve any powers to Welsh Ministers to direct Network Rail’s core activities, which are the operation, maintenance and renewal of the railway infrastructure. This remains a non-devolved responsibility of the Secretary of State and the DfT retains the budget and responsibility for Network Rail’s programmes. No funding has been transferred to Welsh Ministers for these activities.

8. Railway accessibility is a non-devolved matter with responsibility and funding retained by the DfT. The current Wales and Borders franchise does not require the franchisee to invest in accessibility improvements. But, as set out in my Government response to the Committee’s Station Accessibility recommendations, we are committed to making accessibility improvements and investing substantially in this.

9. Statutory responsibility for other public transport services – such as buses, coaches and taxis – is also non-devolved to the Assembly Government. Unlike rail services, the Welsh Assembly Government has no direct contractual relationship with service operators. The bus industry, for example, continues to be deregulated. The vast majority of local bus services are provided commercially by operators. However, local authorities do have responsibility for providing socially necessary services and the Assembly Government makes available funding to support and protect these services and those within rural areas. The main support is provided through bus services operators grant and local transport services grant.

National Transport Plan

10. The National Transport Plan outlines the Assembly Government’s priorities for developing a more integrated transport network in Wales and includes plans for improving accessibility for public transport services and equality of access to transport is a central part of this delivery plan.

11. In developing the National Transport Plan we undertook an Equality Impact Assessment. This assessment identified critical issues in providing equality of access to transport, as well as gaps that need to be filled. The Transport Equality Impact Assessment is a dynamic document, evolving to encompass more stretching plans and learning from the projects that we undertake. We
are currently in the process of updating the plan to reflect our progress to date. We intend to put in place a more robust framework which will allow for greater structure in developing equality of opportunity for all who wish to use the public transport network. In addition, to enhance this work we are currently reviewing our Regional Transport Plan guidance and we will be discussing with local authorities how they plan to take forward their responsibilities for improving accessibility for disabled people in developing transport services.

**Accessibility issues**

12. In taking forward the review of our Equality Impact Assessment for the National Transport Plan and from discussions with stakeholders, we have identified a number of themes which are critical to better accessibility, these include:
   a. Accessible Design
   b. Actual and Perceived Safety
   c. Accessible Information
   d. Training for service providers

**Accessible Design**

13. Evidence suggests that physical barriers provide the biggest issues in preventing members of excluded groups from accessing transport. As part of the work under Economic Renewal: a new direction, we are preparing guidance notes on inclusive design and management, although primarily aimed at building design, we will consider how the principles of this work can help to inform future decisions on the design of public transport infrastructure. It recognises the importance of engaging disabled people in discussions on the design of new buildings and facilities at the earliest possible stage.

14. I am fully committed to providing accessibility for all. The Welsh Assembly Government is continuing it’s commitment to the Wales Station Improvement Programme (NSIP+). The £40 million programme - including £21 million of European Structural funds - seeks to provide exemplary accessibility for station improvement schemes. Equality Impact Assessment is a core requirement for applicants seeking funding under NSIP+. There is a mandatory requirement for an active and inclusive involvement of the local community including disabled user groups.

15. A good example of where this commitment has been put into practice is the current major scheme to modernise Swansea High Street station where, following involvement of Swansea Access For Everyone, MS Society Cymru and Guide Dogs for the Blind, changes have been made to the design of the scheme. All partners to the scheme; Welsh Assembly Government, Arriva Trains Wales, the Council and Network Rail have had intensive on-site meetings and discussions with these representative groups. This involvement has allowed the station to offer greater accessibility for all.
Actual and Perceived Safety

16. Increasing safety and security on public transport is a key priority in the National Transport Plan. We are supporting a number of initiatives that improve the real and perceived safety of public transport. This includes funding through the NSIP+ programme to improve safety and security at train stations. To further improve safety we, along with Arriva Trains Wales and the British Transport Police, are providing funding for a greater presence of uniformed officers. As part of this agreement an additional 21 Police Community Support Officers are operating on the Welsh rail network. To further enhance perceptions of safety we have invested £2m in providing on-train CCTV on all Arriva Trains Wales trains.

17. In addition we are supporting improvements at bus stations, for example, Swansea city ‘Quadrant’ bus station, which has accessibility for disabled passengers built in to the station's design, also includes provision for ‘Rangers' who are available to ensure visitors feel safe and on hand to help passengers find the right bus or the right destination.

Accessible Information

18. The Welsh Assembly Government provides significant funding to Traveline Cymru, which provides information for travellers across Wales. Traveline Cymru provides a joined up and unbiased public transport information for all bus, coach, rail, air and ferry services through several easy to use services, including telephone call service, website and SMS text service. Traveline Cymru tries to make the information it provides as accessible as possible, their website is tested to AA conformance to Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, the call centre uses a BT Type Talk system and all agents are trained to use this facility. As part of the service, the information provided by Traveline Cymru includes information regarding accessibility of stops and services, where available.

19. The Public Transport Users Committee has been established to inform Ministers about strategic issues relating to public transport services in Wales from a perspective based on the experiences and needs of people who use public transport as part of their everyday lives. A draft Forward Work Programme is currently being developed and one of the key areas identified for the Committee to review is the accessibility of information for everyone, especially those in 'protected groups'. Work on reviewing the current information provision and what else would be required to meet the needs of people in protected groups would be one of the first issues we would expect the Committee to consider and advise on.

Training for service providers

20. Although responsibility for training is not devolved to the Welsh Assembly Government we are working closely with Go Skills, the Sector Skills Council for the Passenger Transport Sector, who provide training and development opportunities for people working in that sector. Go Skills' strategic goals are
to raise the skills and professionalism of the workforce and to support the improvement of the sector in terms of efficiency, safety and attractiveness to users.

21. We are also working with the Association of Train Operating Companies, along with the Train Operating Companies themselves, to encourage the development of the Assisted Passenger Reservation Scheme to provide a better quality of service when assisting disabled passengers.

Welsh Assembly Government – other issues

22. One of the key aims in the National Transport Plan is to improve the quality and integration of local bus services. Here, our focus is to promote bus quality partnership schemes that will allow local authorities and bus operators to come together to plan and deliver bus services that meet the needs of local communities. Under these arrangements, local authorities will be able to specify enhanced service requirements such as low floor accessible vehicles; improved reliability, punctuality and safety; enhanced service provision as well as improved infrastructure and facilities. In addition, I am keen to introduce a Welsh Transport Entitlement card that will allow passengers seamless transfer between rail and bus services.

23. The National Transport Plan states our commitment to maintaining free concessionary travel on local bus services for elderly and disabled people. Concessionary fares have been positively received as an economic incentive for bus use within Wales. They encourage elderly and disabled residents to independently participate in economic, social and community based activities.

24. I also want to encourage the Community Transport sector to play a greater role in the provision of local bus services. I have supported the innovative Bwcab bus service in Carmarthenshire that has received a number of awards. I have also relaxed the regulatory regime on section 19 and 22 permits that will allow community transport services greater freedom and flexibility to provide community transport services to those who are unable to access ‘regular’ public transport services, especially in rural areas.

25. Shared space is a concept predominately aimed at reducing the impact of motor traffic in places used by pedestrians. It has proved popular on the continent and is becoming increasingly so in the UK as a means of improving public spaces, such as high streets or town squares. It has become apparent in recent years that while shared surfaces appear to work well for most people, they can present difficulties for some disabled people, particularly those with a visual impairment. Many visually impaired people use the kerb as a tactile guide and can find navigation difficult in its absence. The Department for Transport is currently developing guidance for new shared space schemes which will include guidance on travel training aimed at helping disabled people to use shared space and conventional streets. The aim is to make shared space work for everyone including disabled people. The Welsh Assembly Government will consider this new
guidance and determine how is might be disseminated more widely in Wales.

26. The responsibility for private hire and taxi vehicle services is a non devolved matter for the Welsh Assembly Government. The policy responsibility for taxis rests with the Department for Transport and licensing arrangements with local authorities. Within this framework, the Welsh Assembly Government has supported the Department for Transport’s consultation on exploring ways of improving access to taxis services by disabled people. In addition, the Equality Act 2010 empowers the UK Government to make ‘taxi accessibility’ regulations so that disabled people may get into and out of taxis safely while in wheelchairs and travel safely. The Welsh Assembly Government fully recognises the vital importance of taxis services for many disabled people in Wales, particularly those who may not be able to access conventional public transport services and will be working with the DfT on developing the new regulations.

Conclusions

27. This evidence paper sets out my approach to investing in improving access for everyone, which I am seeking to maintain despite the challenging current economic climate. I genuinely believe that improving accessibility is crucial to unlocking socio-economic and health and wellbeing benefits. This is what people tell us they need.

28. Whilst funding for accessibility improvements is non-devolved to the Assembly Government, I am taking action to improve access to transport services for disabled people as an important part of the National Transport Plan. I remain committed to this principle and the investment in programmes such as NSIP+ demonstrates the scale of our intentions to make real improvements to people’s lives.

29. We are still in the relatively early stages of improving accessibility to public transport and much remains to be done. We have achieved some initial success, and our involvement of user groups and communities has been very welcome. We want to make delivery more coherent and joined up. We want to ensure that the finished improvement does actually meet people’s needs. We want to bring planners, promoters and users together to agree design and functionality and are committed to doing so. I look forward to the assistance of the Equality of Opportunity Committee in this future work.

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