



William Graham AM
Chair
Enterprise and Business Committee
National Assembly for Wales

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Dear William

As Minister for Economy, Science and Transport I have been committed to improving the quality and accessibility of local bus services and community transport in Wales.

I have recognised that local bus services are vital to Welsh economic, cultural and social life. Every day, more than 63,000 people rely on the bus to get to work and about 350,000 trips are made every day to get to hospital appointments, visit friends, go shopping or access leisure. Bus services have the potential to offer people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds a reliable, flexible, affordable and more sustainable way of travelling.

Last week, I published the Voluntary Welsh Bus Quality Standard. This standard is designed to help bus operators and local authorities work together to improve the quality of local bus services across Wales. To maintain their eligibility for payments from the Bus Services Support Grant, local bus operators will need to meet the core requirements of the standard by March 2017.

The report published by the committee following the inquiry into bus and community transport is welcomed, and whilst not accepting some of the recommendations within the report, I do share many of the sentiments expressed within the report as a whole.

Recommendation 1: The Welsh Government should develop a Community Transport Strategy in consultation with the sector to clarify its role in an integrated network and work with local authorities to promote understanding of community transport and what it can and cannot do.

Accepted in Principle: The Welsh Government fully recognises the important contribution that community transport makes to integrated public transport. The Welsh Government's ambitions for an Integrated public transport system are set out within the Wales Transport Strategy and which is kept under review. The Welsh Government will keep under consideration how the community transport is reflected within the strategy.

Recommendation 2: Welsh Government should review good practice in the provision of financial and policy support for bus services and Community Transport from across Britain to consider what lessons can be learnt and applied in Wales to promote greater stability and partnership working in Wales. In particular if Total Transport proves effective in England, then serious consideration should be given to adopting a similar model in Wales.

Accepted: The Welsh Government will keep good practice delivered in other nations under consideration in the development of our policy approach to bus and community transport services.

Recommendation 3: We believe the Welsh Government could explore the current approach to eligibility for concessionary fares to ensure that scarce resources are being targeted most effectively to help those in greatest need and consider how any change might impact on the Community Transport sector.

Accepted: Ensuring that funding allocated to mandatory concessionary fares continues to support people in greatest need The Welsh Government will continue to consider the approach to eligibility for concessionary fares to ensure funding is used effectively and continues to offer value for money in advancement of our policies to make Wales a more equal nation.

Recommendation 4: Welsh Government should urgently review the reimbursement rates available to Community Transport operators to ensure they are not losing money and ensure that future funding settlements for concessionary fares provide the greatest possible certainty for both bus and Community Transport operators

Accepted: Reimbursement rates available for mandatory concessionary fares for all operators providing local public transport are subject to review.

Recommendation 5: The Committee supports the Welsh Government's calls for greater powers over buses. In the meantime, we urge the Welsh Government to consider examples from other parts of the UK and ensure Wales makes the best possible use of the Executive powers it currently has.

Accepted: The Welsh Government continues to press the UK Government for an improved devolved settlement in respect of functions for public transport in Wales as part of the ongoing negotiations on the Wales Bill.

Recommendation 6: The Committee notes with concern that proposals for areas of England could see cities and regions of England granted powers over public transport, which are greater than those available to Wales. We recommend urgent talks with the UK Government to ensure Wales is not disadvantaged in seeking the powers needed to improve bus services for the people of Wales.

Accepted: The Welsh Government continues to press the UK Government for an improved devolved settlement in respect of functions for public transport in Wales as part of the ongoing negotiations on the Wales Bill.

Recommendation 7: Wales should, as a matter of urgency, have its own dedicated Traffic Commissioner, based in Wales and accountable to Welsh Ministers and the National Assembly for Wales.

Accepted: The Welsh Government accepts that Wales should have a dedicated Traffic Commissioner, in relation to public transport functions, that is accountable to Welsh Ministers and the National Assembly for Wales. Discussions between the UK and Welsh Governments are close to agreeing the establishment of a dedicated, full-time Traffic Commissioner for Wales, based in Wales and supported by three full-time bilingual staff. At this stage, the new post would exercise precisely the same powers as now, and remain responsible to the Secretary of State.

Recommendation 8: Welsh Government should move quickly to create a fully resourced transport planning unit within Transport for Wales to oversee effective planning and integration of bus travel in Wales.

Not accepted: Responsibility for local transport planning is a function exercised by local authorities in Wales. Strategic planning is a matter for the Welsh Government. Transport for Wales is a wholly owned company

of the Welsh ministers set up in the first instance to concentrate on providing advice and technical expertise to deliver the procurement of the next Wales and Borders Rail Franchise and south east Wales Metro programme.

Recommendation 9: The Minister should ensure that there are sufficient resources available to support the introduction of Welsh Bus Quality standards in a realistic timescale, and ensure standards are mandatory across Wales.

Accepted: The Voluntary Welsh Bus Quality Standards were published on 24 March. Bus operators providing eligible public transport services will be required to meet the core requirements within the standard by March 2017 to maintain their eligibility for payments from the Bus Services Support Grant. Funding available for this grant has been maintained at £25m for 2016/2017.

Recommendation 10: Given the clear need to improve both policy and network integration, the Welsh Government should revisit the recommendations in our 2013 Integrated Public Transport report and increase its efforts to implement a fully integrated Welsh transport network.

Accepted: The Welsh Government will keep the Committee's recommendations under consideration as our policy approach to bus services and community transport in Wales is developed.

Recommendation 11: Welsh Government should set a deadline of 2018 (to coincide with the introduction of the rail franchise) for implementation of an all-Wales integrated ticketing system to be used on all commercial bus, rail and Metro services

Accepted in principle: The Welsh Government is committed to the delivery of an integrated multi modal ticketing scheme to be available to passengers using bus, rail and other metro services. The Wales and Borders rail franchise will be awarded in time for the new train operating company to commence services in October 2018.

Participation in regional / national smart or digital ticketing scheme, when in place and operational has been included as an enhanced required within the Voluntary Welsh Bus Quality Standard 2016.

Recommendation 12: We recommend that guidance issued in support of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 should set out a clear role for Public Service Boards in ensuring effective integration of bus and Community Transport services with wider policy areas.

Accepted: The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 will come into force in April 2016. The Act requires public bodies, including the Welsh Government, to think more about the long-term, to work better with people, communities and each other, look to prevent problems and take a more joined-up approach – helping us to create a Wales that we all want to live in, now and in the future.

Edwina Hart