

Equality of Opportunity Committee

Inquiry into the impact of Welsh Government policy on the accessibility of transport services for disabled people in Wales

Response from Age Cymru

1 Introduction

Age Cymru is the leading charity working to improve the lives of all older people in Wales. We believe older people should be able to lead healthy and fulfilled lives, have adequate income, access to high quality services and the opportunity to shape their own future. We seek to provide a strong voice for all older people in Wales and to raise awareness of the issues of importance to them.

This response has been prepared in collaboration with Age Concern Partnership Wales. Age Concern Partnership Wales is made up of 22 locally-based, independent Age Concern Organisations and Age Cymru. Our activities include campaigning, research, advocacy, information, support for forums of older people and befriending. Through the combination of an all-Wales presence, local community based organisations and our network of older people Age Concern Partnership Wales is well positioned to be in touch with the issues affecting older people.

We are pleased to respond to this inquiry. Our response is based on the views and experiences of older and disabled people expressed at consultation events and in direct response to the consultation, in addition to the results of our own research. As part of our current *Towards Common Ground* campaign, we used the 'Community Calculator / Cyfrifiannell Gymunedol', a tool which allowed older people to 'age proof' their community according to ten key components which older people have told us make a community age friendly. One of the components concerned public transport¹ and 649 older people responded on this issue.

The Community Calculator allows Age Cymru to be in an informed position to analyse first-hand appraisals of public transport provision across Wales. We are able to identify evidence of good and poor provisions: to identify what works well and what requires improvement, to ensure that national and local governments are able to provide realistic transport options across all communities in Wales. Some of the findings are explored below.

¹ Respondents were asked: "How good is the choice and quality of public transport including community transport and the provision of routes in your community?"

2 Inquiry questions

Q1: Issues of particular concern to disabled people who use, or want to use, transport services:

➤ Access restrictions

Access restrictions are a recurrent theme across the comments made by Community Calculator respondents and more widely, regarding physical access onto and off public transport. Age-related issues, including frailty and reduced mobility as well as disability, means that public transport can present significant barriers for many older people so that it is often not a realistic or safe option. We have also heard reports from older and disabled people that some buses will only accept one or two wheelchairs on board at a time. Improvements to transport accessibility should include access on and off public transport, such as lowered floors, ramps, handrails and accessible seating.

“No73 bus service needs steps for disabled people” (Conwy)
“Could do with more buses being disabled friendly” (Denbighshire)
“Quite good but again no help for me being disabled” (Gwynedd)
“Good bus and train. Very poor at weekends and bank holiday. Station platforms need attention – big gap to train” (Gwynedd)
“Only one bus route. 2.5 hours schedule. Quality varies from bad to awful. Buses either too small or not easily accessible” (Isle of Anglesey)
“Local buses need ramps that work! We need a luxury touring coach in our county so that people with electric wheelchairs can go on holiday with their families” (Pembrokeshire)

Older people tend to be lesser users of rail services than of buses, in some cases it is also because stations or trains are inaccessible or because of a lack of modal transfer between bus routes and railway stations (For details on the accessibility of railway stations in Wales, please see our response to the recent Committee Inquiry on this issue). We have heard worrying accounts from disabled people, such as reports that disabled facilities on trains are often used as storage areas and made inaccessible; and that when trains are cancelled and replacement buses are used, wheelchairs often cannot get onto them.

Other barriers to rail use include cost and the fact that rail services tend to cover longer distances. Some of these issues would be addressed by examining whether extensions to concessionary fare schemes can be extended to cover rail services and by ensuring that local transport planners take steps to make sure that bus services link to stations. We are pleased that work is being taken forward to remove high steps between platforms and trains where these exist, and stress that this should be done as soon as possible across the rail network in Wales.

Age Cymru is calling on the Welsh Assembly Government and local authorities to work with transport companies, including bus and rail, to improve their services with regard to physical accessibility. Inability to access services and facilities is a key part of the risk of older and disabled people’s social exclusion, and public transport in many parts of Wales is central to this problem. Provision of safe, accessible public transport will promote older people’s independence and their freedom to access their community according to their wish.

➤ Transport stops

The accessibility and safety of bus stops and railway stations are also key issues for older and disabled people. Many comments expressed significant difficulty in access local transport stops due to location, geography and lack of shelters and seating.

“Difficult to access buses in town – long way to walk to stops” (Cardiff)
“Very poor. No train station. Buses infrequent and the better bus service is on the main road, but no pavement on the road from the village to the bus stop” (Cardiff)
“Bus stop 15mins walk down hill, longer walk uphill on return” (Denbighshire)
“I have a good bus service once an hour but a hill to negotiate for the for the bus stop” (Gwynedd)
“Buses infrequent. Half mile to railway station. No bus shelters” (Gwynedd)
“Bus station could do with more shelters with seating” (Monmouthshire)
“No buses on Sunday. Buses within walking distance depending on mobility. (Rhondda Cynon Taff)
“Long walk to bus but frequent service. No shelter” (Swansea)
“No bus shelter on street” (Torfaen)

Bus stops in particular must be accessible to persons with limited mobility, as buses are often used as a link to other transport and essential community services, such as hospitals. Adequate seating and shelter at bus stops is imperative for many older and disabled people. If, for a multitude of reasons, services are delayed or are infrequent then the provision of seating and shelter from the elements becomes even more important for older people, many of whom struggle to stand for long periods of time without experiencing pain or placing their safety at risk. Transport and spatial planners must ensure that people can access the services they need to where they need to, including those who can only walk short distances. Local authorities must also take into consideration the distance people have to walk between bus stops, and ensure that this distance is reasonable for persons of varying mobility.

➤ Links to services

Across comments left by *Community Calculator* respondents and regularly expressed to us by older and disabled people, public transport is repeatedly evaluated on its ability to take people to the places where they need to go, particularly hospitals. Some responses are positive, others more critical; however the merits of public transport provision are demonstrated to be judged on its integration with key community services.

“A bus direct to the hospital, Heath or Llandough would be useful” (Cardiff)
“Not enough buses per hour and not one to the hospital. If going to the hospital it means catching two buses” (Carmarthenshire)
“No transport to hospital from seaside” (Carmarthenshire)
“Public transport is excellent for Rhuddlan, especially to Glan Clwyd Hospital. There is a bus around every 10 minutes” (Denbighshire)
“Some areas of town not covered. No town – railway station link. Station on outskirts, lack of direct bus link to Abergavenny – Newport” (Monmouthshire)
“Town service excellent, helpful and friendly drivers. Difficult to get to Neville Hall hospital for appointments and to get back from Newport pm” (Monmouthshire)

“More integrated transport is needed” (Powys)
“Difficult using public transport to local hospital” (Vale of Glamorgan)

Q2: The adequacy of the National Transport Plan and its associated Equality Action Plan as a means of improving the accessibility of transport in Wales;

We welcomed the production of the National Transport Plan and believe that positive steps have been taken to improve public transport in Wales. Unfortunately there is still vast geographical variation in the accessibility of public transport across regions and therefore we do not feel the Plan and its associated Equality Action Plan have achieved an adequate improvement across Wales at a national level.

We note that the ratings of public transport provision across Wales were in general reasonably positive in comparison to other issues evaluated by the *Community Calculator* respondents. 62.1% of respondents scored the provision in their community between 7 and 10, which indicates average to excellent provision. Successes must be celebrated, and the Welsh Assembly government’s provision of free bus passes along with pilot schemes to subsidise rail travel has gone a long way to improve older people’s access to public transport across Wales.

However, evidence from the Community Calculator results suggests that there is no equity of provision across Wales and some older and disabled people do not have access to realistic transport options. 37.9% of respondents scored their provision between 0-6, which indicates unacceptable to poor provision.

The Community Calculator collated comments which expressed a wide range of satisfaction levels with public transport in their area. Generally speaking, public transport infrastructure appears to be stronger in more densely populated areas, such as South East Wales, rather than more rural communities.

“One bus a week on a Thursday” (Carmarthenshire)
“Rural location. No public transport” (Ceredigion)
“We are not served by a bus – expect a school bus 8.30am and return around 3.30pm. I can only live here while I can drive” (Gwynedd)
“To and from town once a day with limited time there. Impossible for longer trips e.g. dentist” (Gwynedd)
“Bus every 20 mins” (Newport)
“10 minute max wait for bus” (Torfaen)

As seen from the range of comments above, the standards of public transport are disparate across Wales and some communities are left without any realistic transport options. Local authorities should ensure that integrated transport systems, including rail, buses, and community transport, are accessible to all communities as without a basic level of service older people are at risk of increased isolation and unable to access basic essential services.

In our consultation response to the National Action Plan we welcomed the aim: ‘To improve the planning and policy development processes to ensure stronger integration between transport and key services/facilities’. We called for more detail on how the Welsh Assembly

Government plans to achieve this aim through strengthening the role of transport planning during policy development and planning. It is particularly important that public organisations and government departments' work together to ensure that both public services and transport are provided in a joined up fashion. We believe the Equality Action Plan could have gone further and would be strengthened by extending the Equality and Human Rights training beyond Welsh Assembly staff to cover local authority planners

Access to appropriate services and facilities, continues to be a real concern for many older and disabled people with a significant number facing major barriers to access on a daily basis. These issues are often particularly pertinent in rural communities. Decisions about the location of services must take older people's needs into account; and transport and spatial planners must ensure that people can access the services they need to, including those who can only walk short distances.

Q3: The impact of Welsh Government guidance on Regional Transport Plans as a means to improve accessibility of transport in Wales;

We are not aware of the impact of guidance on Regional Transport Plans.

We would like to highlight the fact that safety and accessibility of buses is an important issue for older people which must be addressed through Regional Transport Plans. Older people are sometimes put off using bus services because buses move off before they have been able to take a seat or stop too suddenly, often away from raised curbs. The condition and maintenance of bus stops is also a barrier for some older people: adequate lighting, seating and shelter must be provided and regularly inspected to encourage more frequent use of some bus services. The Welsh Assembly Government, local authorities and bus companies need to improve services more rapidly, with particular regard to their accessibility and safety.

Q4: Policies which aim to improve the accessibility of bus and coach services, such as concessionary fare policy and community transport;

Concessionary fare policy

The flagship policy of free concessionary travel on local bus services has made a significant difference to a large number of older and disabled people in Wales by providing a connection to services and amenities. It is vital that free local travel for all older and disabled people is protected. As mentioned previously, while everyone welcomes their free bus pass, they can only make use of it if there are sufficient services in their area: *"Bus passes are only any good if there are busses in your area! – they are useful in an urban environment , not much good in rural areas"*

Issues also still exist in relation to the use of passes on cross-border services and on other methods of transport where suitable bus services are not available or accessible to older people. For example, we would like to see tokens for community transport or taxis to be available to all those who cannot use bus services, or where bus services are limited, especially in rural areas. The Welsh Assembly Government need to work with the UK Government on cross border usage of bus passes and guide local authorities to arrange reciprocal arrangements locally, particularly in areas where people travel across border to access health services such as Powys.

Community transport

The role of community transport in helping people to access their community and essential services is also vital. As the National Transport Plan acknowledged, community transport often provides services where public transport cannot or does not. It can do so on a door-to-door basis for people with specific mobility needs. People who are unable to use public transport due to ill health or disability should be provided with information about community transport services in their area. These services provide an essential lifeline for older people who need them and we would like to see increased provision in parts of Wales where services are lacking or under resourced. Good practice models of community transport provision should be replicated and strongly supported, including financially if necessary, by the public sector to ensure their sustainability.

Realistic and responsive public transport options can have a significant impact on older people's opportunities and freedom of choice, and enable them to maintain independence, health and wellbeing within their communities. People who are unable to use public transport can greatly benefit from community transport services in their area and the Welsh Assembly Government should ensure that appropriate support is provided for these services across all parts of Wales.

Examples of successful community transport projects

Community Transport in Powys

Partnership working between Help the Aged in Wales and Powys Community Transport Forum has helped to develop a county-wide sustainable transport infrastructure. Help the Aged in Wales worked with local communities at a grass-roots level by developing various models to meet specific local needs. These included Dial-A-Ride services, Community Car Schemes and taxi token schemes. These local services have helped to strengthen overall strategic development at the county level.

O Ddrws i Ddrws - Door to Door

In order to meet needs identified in a sparsely populated rural area Help the Aged in Wales used a community development approach to identify and recruit a core group of local people and to develop their skills in order that they could formulate plans to relieve local isolation. The participants decided to establish their own community transport scheme which recruited local volunteers, using their own vehicles, as a car share scheme for older people.

A number of training sessions were provided to help the group to register as a company limited by guarantee, develop a business plan, draw up a fundraising strategy, and identify potential funding sources for the project. Subsequently the group secured a Blue Peter vehicle for the project. The model of community transport developed by the group is being recognised as a model of good practice by the local authority.

Q5: Accessibility issues facing pedestrians, such as the use of shared spaces;

Pavements

Community Calculator respondents across Wales expressed their dissatisfaction with pavements in their neighbourhoods², which give rise to fear of, and actual, falls. Users of electric wheelchairs and scooters have also reported that poorly maintained pavements and cars parked on pavements cause them difficulties.

There is large variation in the mobility and physical capacities of older people, more so than any other demographic group. Respondents to the *Community Calculator* identified significant concerns for older persons' who use wheelchairs or mobility scooters, and those who experience sight loss, to access their neighbourhoods safely:

"Very difficult again due to sight loss. Pot holes" (Caerphilly)
"Need more pavements to enable wheelchairs users to get around more" (Carmarthenshire)
"Not very well kept. The wheelchairs / mobility scooters use the road and they are not much better" (Carmarthenshire)
"Good in the towns. Not as good maybe elsewhere. I tripped up using my scooter so have got rid of it" (Conwy)
"Not very good for wheelchair users or blind people" (Denbighshire)
"Some paths OK but some are too sloping for wheelchairs etc. They would have to use the road" (Gwynedd)
"Impossible to use wheelchairs or mobility scooters anywhere in town" (Gwynedd)
"Inaccessible for wheelchairs and mobility scooters. Pavements often blocked by cars and police do nothing!" (Neath & Port Talbot)
"Very bad, uneven, mobility vehicles have to go on road" (Newport)
"Pavements are often uneven and very narrow. Using a scooter I often have to use the road. Vehicles parked on the pavements or over flushed kerbs are the bane of my life" (Pembrokeshire)
"Not many drop pavements for wheelchairs or scooters" (Torfaen)

Poorly maintained pavements can have an enormous impact on persons with physical and sensory disabilities, placing these older people at extraordinary risk and jeopardising their safety. Inadequate surfacing, as well as poor access points for wheelchair and mobility scooter users, reduces many individuals safety by forcing them to use the road as the only means of accessing their community. This situation is unacceptable, forcing older people to exchange one serious risk for another and no safe means of traversing their neighbourhoods. We are calling for the Welsh Assembly Government to work with local authorities to ensure that they consider the variety of needs older and disabled people may have, and ensure that accessibility planning and maintenance promotes each individuals capacity, independence and safety.

Q6: The accessibility of taxis and private hire vehicles services

The comments we receive around accessibility of taxis and private hire vehicles focus on the costs. Those who are unable to use buses (for disability or mobility reasons) are often forced to use taxis due to a lack of a reasonable alternative, and most people receive no financial

² Respondents were asked: "How well kept are the pavements in your community? To what extent do they reduce the risk of falls and enable wheelchairs and mobility scooters to move freely?"

support to help with these significant costs. This is not acceptable and we believe that taxi tokens should be made available in these circumstances.

Q7: The impact of Welsh Government policy on the integration of transport services in relation to the needs and concerns of disabled people

While progress has been made as a result of Welsh Assembly Government policy in efforts to improve the integration of transport services, we believe there is still significantly more work that needs to be done in relation to the needs and concerns of older and disabled people across Wales.

Older and disabled people across Wales frequently express their frustrations over the lack of co-ordination between public transport and hospital appointments, particularly in rural areas. Older people in areas such as Maesteg and Haverfordwest have recently told us that they have been unable to attend hospital appointments because of a lack of connecting public transport. Additionally Age Concern Ceredigion regularly receives complaints from older people in their area about the lack of flexibility in transport to hospital appointments with services only allowing two drop off times a day for example. A question frequently asked by older people in Wales is why hospital appointments cannot be more closely linked to patient transport availability and vice versa.

We believe a fully integrated strategy for public transport should be developed to particularly address the needs of those individuals without access to a car. Free concessionary travel on local bus services has made a significant improvement, however there is more that can be done to improve the transport opportunities for older people who are unable to access bus services, either as a result of geography or disability. Alternative provision needs to be put in place, for example through other forms of public transport, community transport schemes or taxi tokens.

All older people, regardless of their income and physical ability, must have equitable access to the services and facilities that many of us take for granted. Decisions about the location of services must take older people's needs into account, and there should be stronger integration between transport and key services. We support the view of the Older People's Commissioner for Wales that a guarantee should be provided that older people will be included in the membership of the Public Transport Users Committee which is to be established by 2011.

3 Two personal responses received by Age Cymru

Person 1

Person 1 has Parkinson's disease and finds walking a challenge. He finds travelling on buses easy providing he can sit in the seats at the front which are reserved for disabled people because they have plenty of leg room. He also appreciates the step which can be lowered to allow entry to the bus.

Conversely he finds it almost impossible to get into the new style taxis designed to carry six people because he cannot lift his foot over their high sill. He does not have experience of

travelling by train. Although he does drive a car he does not use it to come into town since the free bus pass was introduced. He cannot park near his bus stop.

He lives in Cardiff and considers that the integration between bus and rail in the city to be very bad. Another arrangement which he finds problematic is the different starting points for bus routes in Cardiff. Some buses start from the bus station while others start at points remote from the bus station. As he finds walking difficult, a journey requiring two bus journeys can often present him with a major challenge. He also finds the small tiles with raised knobs found at road crossings, etc cause him to lose his balance.

He does not find transport facilities in Cardiff very different from those in other countries.

Person 2

Person 2 is blind. She has a guide dog and she travels extensively by bus and train and taxi. She finds it reasonably easy to travel but would appreciate more assistance at railway stations. A particular problem for her is that on Valleys trains the conductor does not announce what the next station stop will be or when the train has arrived at a station. When she is waiting at a station with a long platform she sometimes has difficulty in locating the train. They often have only two carriages. Very often these stations are unmanned. There are still a small number of taxi drivers who will not allow a guide dog into their taxis but the situation has improved greatly.

Her comments about integration are the same as those made by Person 1. They both live in Cardiff. She has very strong views about shared spaces - not surprising when she cannot see any of the things she is sharing the space with and there are no pavements or other features to guide her. She also finds large pedestrianised areas present difficulties. They cause her to become disorientated because there are few reference points such as bus shelters, and there is no traffic noise to tell her in which direction she should be going.

She does not think that using transport in Wales is different from using transport in the rest of the UK.

4 Conclusion

We hope that these comments will prove useful to the Equality of Opportunity Committee in its consideration of this important issue. We would be more than happy to provide any further information as required.