

The Welsh Consumer Council's Response to *Policy Review of Public Transport*, a Consultation Report from the National Assembly's Environment, Planning and Transport Committee

Main Thrust of the Document Endorsed

1 The Welsh Consumer Council welcomes the Environment, Planning and Transport Committee's consultation report, *Policy Review of Public Transport*. We welcome the realism and vision of the approach taken. In particular we endorse the Chairman's opening remarks, which encapsulate the goal, the problems and the necessary solutions:

- "We want public transport in Wales to be integrated, accessible, affordable, and an attractive alternative to the car"
- "the evidence we have heard shows that people want to use public transport, but are dismayed by lack of provision and poor service quality"
- "This calls for a visionary approach backed up with considerable resources . . . to address historic levels of under investment in public transport".

Welcome the Realism of the Document

2 The Consumer Council welcomes the realism of the consultation document, as evidenced by the inclusion of tables showing what a small part bus and train now play in meeting people's transport needs (e.g. only 9% of journeys to work made by bus or train); and how little is currently spent by local authorities directly on public passenger transport (8% of net expenditure on roads and transport going on

public passenger transport, 4% spent on car parks, 5% on concessionary fares, and 83% on roads, lighting and road safety).

- 3 The realism of the consultation document is also demonstrated by its inclusion of figures from a Welsh Consumer Council survey showing that 79% of bus passengers surveyed said that they would prefer to go by car. We support the Committee's conclusion (paragraph 2.23) that what has been achieved so far is not enough, and

“the challenge of reversing the decline in public transport patronage overall requires more concentrated action through a partnership between operators, local authorities and the National Assembly”.

Greater Priority Should be Given to Light Rail

- 4 We note the Committee's reference to light rail in paragraph 3.15, where the Committee comments that

“We were also impressed by the popularity of second generation public transport such as light rail schemes, which can significantly raise the image of public transport.”

The Welsh Consumer Council suggests that the popularity of light rail in many European cities is more than an 'image' issue. We suggest, for example, that the popularity of modern electric trams in towns such as Amsterdam and Düsseldorf is to do with the trams being affordable, reliable, frequent and fast. In other words, light rail delivers what most urban consumers want of a public transport service. It is also significant that the light rail systems in many cities are comprehensive, that is, they are part of a city wide network giving access to most of the city centre and many suburban areas.

- 5 The tram, like the train, is seen by many as an acceptable alternative to the car. It is unlikely that a public transport policy based entirely on the bus will ever succeed, whereas a policy that includes significant development of both rail and light rail services in the urban areas of south east Wales is likely to be effective. This should involve paying

attention to regular, high speed links *between* towns and cities as well as *within* them.

Consumer Representation

- 6 The Welsh Consumer Council welcomes the Committee's endorsement of its call for an all Wales group to represent bus users [*Consultation Report*, paragraph. 3.15]. We note also reference to the need for local authorities to make special efforts "to engage those most reliant on public transport, such as young and elderly people and those from socially excluded communities".
- 7 It is absolutely necessary that planners and providers engage with transport users. We deplore how little this has been done in the past. The needs and experience of users should be the foundation for driving forward development and improvement.
- 8 But it is also necessary to engage directly with those who do *not* use public transport. If the aim of public policy is to encourage a modal shift from the car to public transport, then investment in public transport must be driven by the needs and expectations of its *potential*, as well as its *actual*, users.
- 9 Effective consumer representation must be resourced. It must be supported by an on-going process of research, using surveys, focus groups, analysis of complaints, and any other method appropriate to gathering and re-presenting the experience of users.
- 10 Effective consumer representation must also be informed – aware of the best in development and innovation elsewhere in Europe and internationally. In other words, effective consumer representation must be able to engage on an equal basis with providers and planners, representing accurately the needs and experience of all consumers, and able to challenge the assumptions and arguments of providers and planners.
- 11 Effective consumer representation should feed directly into the monitoring and evaluation process (Chapter 6), where a user assessment is essential. This cannot be over stressed. Public transport

is an area where providers and planners have tended to make headlines in proclaiming as achievements and improvements things that are deficient from the users point of view.

Suitability of Existing Organisational Structure

- 12 The Welsh Consumer Council takes no view on the appropriate number of regional consortia [*Consultation Report*, paragraph 8.1], although we can see the sense in relating the number to the National Assembly's Economic fora boundaries [Consultation Report, paragraph: 4.13]. As a consumer organisation our primary concern is with the ability of the consortia, however, organised, to deliver a high quality, accessible, integrated, affordable public transport service to people across Wales. Clearly, however, if the consortia are to be effective, there is a need [as recognised in Chapter 4 of the Consultation Report] for more robust constitutional arrangements, a dedicated specialist staff, and appropriate financing, as well as reassurance from local authorities that they "will be prepared to use their powers on planning, traffic and highway management and parking regulations in a targeted way".

Options for Organisational Change

- 13 The Welsh Consumer Council remains convinced that an all-Wales Passenger Transport Authority would be the most appropriate mechanism to take forward the immense task of delivering a modern, integrated transport service across Wales.
- 14 Again the primary reason why the Council argues for an all-Wales PTA is because it believes that a PTA is more likely to deliver a service that is based on the needs of its users. The council's thinking on the subject has been set out in a number of reports over the past ten years, and is summarised in an article, 'Why a Passenger Transport Authority for Wales', published in the June 2001 issue of *The Welsh Consumer*. The text of the article is reproduced below (paragraphs 15 to39).

WHY A PASSENGER TRANSPORT AUTHORITY FOR WALES

- 15 Wales needs a Passenger Transport Authority to take control of Wales fragmented and outdated public transport system, and provide a clear and user-focussed lead to the development of a modern, integrated transport system based on and responsive to the needs of travellers.
- 16 Over the past ten years the Consumer Council has argued the case for some kind of all-Wales approach to transport planning and provision. The case for a Passenger Transport Authority was most recently put in the Council's January 2001 report, *Bus Travel in Wales*, and in the Welsh Consumer Council's presentation to the National Assembly's current review of public transport.
- 17 While there is widespread recognition that the present arrangement is unsatisfactory, some people argue for a 'regional', rather than a 'national' or 'all-Wales' approach.
- 18 The Consumer Council has argued for an all-Wales approach to transport planning and provision for a number of reasons. First, travel is not limited by local authority or regional boundaries, For the user or 'consumer' of travel services, whether by bus, train, private car, bicycle or plane, local boundaries are not the issue. Roads, railways and bus services cross boundaries. Planning has to match the user's experience.
- 19 Second, the new rail franchise will be an all-Wales franchise, covering all the 'local' routes operating within Wales, as well as the links through Hereford and Shrewsbury to Chester. Similarly the trunk road system is already managed by the National Assembly on an all-Wales basis, just as it was previously managed by the Welsh Office.
- 20 Third, government policy at both Wales and UK level has shifted towards an 'integrated' approach, seeking to 'join up' rail, bus, cycle, pedestrian and private car systems into a more integrated whole. We are trying to re-engineer our transport systems so that, in the future, it may become easier to combine bus and rail travel, or car and rail travel, and to move between all modes. As part of integration

government is encouraging integrated public transport information services, through ticketing systems, and single all-Wales concessionary fare systems.

21 All these things are about moving from our current fragmented transport system towards something better understood on mainland Europe, where provision for pedestrians, cyclists, the private car, and the tram, bus and train, has for many years been so much better organised.

22 To do this we need integration not just across systems and between modes, but across boundaries. We need planning that, for the first time, gives full consideration to transport *within* Wales (and not just between Wales and England on the existing east-west routes).

23 And, given the deplorable state of much of the transport system in Wales, we need an Authority with the resources and commitment and duty to achieve something better.

24 Government has recently given a number of new and powerful agencies and regulators a prime duty to look to the needs of the consumer. This is a radical and important move away from planning industries on the basis of the needs of the providers and producers. This shift in emphasis is evident in areas as diverse as the new Food Standards Agency, and Postcom, the new regulator for postal services.

25 The Welsh Consumer Council believes that the same approach should be taken to setting up a Passenger Transport Authority for Wales. The primary function must be to put the needs of the traveller first. This has never happened before, as evidenced by the steady decline of the bus service between 1950 and the present, and the recent rapid decline of Britain's rail services (after years of underinvestment).

26 An all-Wales Passenger Transport Authority should take a strategic approach to transport policy and planning, promoting an integrated and user focussed transport system.

27 The authority should ensure integration and interconnection between rail, bus, coach and air services, and appropriate interchanges between car and public transport:

- 28 The Authority should be charged with ensuring that appropriate consideration is given to walking and cycling in the development of an integrated transport system.
- 29 In developing a user focussed transport system, putting the needs of the user first, the Authority should work closely with existing consumer representative bodies in the rail industry, and should be charged with ensuring proper representation for users of local bus services, whose interests have been so badly neglected over many decades.
- 30 The Authority should be responsible for purchasing or contracting for the purchase of 'socially necessary' bus services, working with or delegating functions to local authorities or groups of local authorities, where appropriate.
- 31 The Authority should facilitate the franchising of passenger rail services within and to and from Wales – being joint signator to rail franchise agreements, specifying and purchasing appropriate rail services:
- 32 The Authority should ensure the provision of multi-modal total journey passenger information, providing the public sector in-put to existing passenger information services.
- 33 The Authority should ensure the smooth and seamless operation of the all-Wales concessionary fare scheme on buses, working to extend that to include rail services.
- 34 The Authority should work closely with the local planning and highway authorities so that their plans support and are integrated with the PTA strategy and the development of a modern transport system.
- 35 The Authority should take the lead role in ensuring the provision of responsive community transport, and the integration, in so far as is possible and appropriate, of community transport within the over-all public transport system across Wales.
- 36 The Authority should take on the responsibilities of the Traffic Commissioner, should be responsible for specifying minimum

standards, and should be responsible for investing or securing investment in the transport infrastructure.

- 37 Finally, the Authority should be responsible for ensuring the provision of high quality bus and rail stations and stops, and for ensuring minimum quality standards across the network.
- 38 The task is enormous. For fifty years the needs of cyclists and pedestrians have been largely ignored. Policy towards bus and rail has been largely about managing decline. There has been substantial investment in road, but in the context of poor long term planning, poor land use planning, and policies in the public transport area that forced more and more people into cars and onto roads, which increasingly could not and cannot cope.
- 39 In summary, the Welsh Consumer Council argues for an all-Wales approach to transport planning, development and investment not because, in some abstract sense, that might be a better planning system, but because that is the approach most likely to deliver benefits to the consumer – the traveller.

CONCLUSION

- 40 In conclusion, the Welsh Consumer Council welcomes the realism and vision of the *Policy Review of Public Transport*. Both realism and vision are essential - *realism* because we need to recognise how poor and unpopular is the service that is currently available, and *vision* because what is needed is more in the nature of a 'transformation' than an 'improvement' or 'development'.
- 41 In paragraphs 4 and 5 the Welsh Consumer Council recommends investment in both train and light rail (electric tram) systems in urban areas.
- 42 In paragraphs 6 to 11 the Council welcomes the Committee's commitment to consumer representation, but emphasises that this must be resourced and informed, and should embrace the needs and experience of both actual and potential users of public transport.

- 43 In paragraph 12 the Council endorses the view that regional consortia need more robust constitutional arrangements, a dedicated specialist staff and appropriate financing, and appropriate support from local authorities in the areas of planning, traffic and highway management and parking regulation.
- 44 Finally, in paragraphs 13 to 39 the Welsh Consumer Council sets out its views on why a Passenger Transport Authority would be the most appropriate mechanism to take forward the immense task of delivering a modern, integrated transport service across Wales.

Welsh Consumer Council
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