



North Pembrokeshire Transport Forum Fforwm Trafnidiaeth Gogledd Penfro

News Briefing – September 2013

Bus Services for Older Passengers

In the Autumn issue of *Bus Users*, BUUK Chair Gillian Merron has highlighted the findings of an Age UK report into the effects of cuts to rural bus services on older people. Despite having free bus travel, the report points to growing isolation among older people as services are reduced or removed. Many older people in rural areas rely entirely on bus services to access healthcare, social activities, community events and shops, as well as to visit friends and family.

Ms Merron added: 'Older people in rural areas face the double challenge of having many services and amenities centralised in towns and cities that they now can't access because they simply can't get to them...Free bus travel for older people has been a great success and has enabled the millions who use the concession to lead active lives. Older and retired people make a huge contribution to society, undertaking volunteering and providing vital childcare support to family members who wouldn't otherwise be able to return to work...When bus services are cut it isn't just older people who suffer - we all suffer.'

National Assembly Cross Party Group on Community Transport

Following concerns that future changes to the way Local Health Boards operate may lead to increased demand for patient access to services via community transport, Wayne Lewis, Head of Transport at Cwm Taf Health Board, was invited to talk about access issues at the Group's 25th September meeting.

Mr Lewis noted that the 2010 Griffiths Review reported that non-emergency patient transport provided a vital service for thousands of patients across Wales, enabling patients to access outpatient, day treatment and other services at NHS hospitals. Only 7% of journeys were undertaken by the voluntary sector.

Patient transport issues raised during the meeting included: transport eligibility criteria, patient mobility categories, dissimilar hospital appointment and transport booking systems (i.e; little joined up working between the health sector, Local Authorities and the community transport sector), limited service planning, and lack of information about what alternative transport is available.

Mr Lewis reported on the plethora of initiatives and working groups currently underway. Others were concerned about the development of overlapping, complex partnerships that are cutting across the boundaries of Social Services, Regional Transport Consortia and Local Health Boards.

Potential issues were connected to the expectation of greater community transport involvement in the delivery of gap filling services. These included concerns about the capacity of the sector to undertake additional journeys (as demand nearly always outstrips supply) and the longer term sustainability of such services, due to annual funding rounds which lead to perceptions of risk for potential commissioners of services.

Transport in Rural Wales

The North Pembrokeshire Transport Forum noted in its paper *The Role of Transport in Rural Development* (February 2013) that there is a great deal of rhetoric regarding equal access to services, ensuring equal opportunities for all, adults and children, in education, employment, business development, social and health care and so on. None of these can be addressed without proper access to transport in rural areas, where the vast majority of the deficit lies. There is no point in having the best hospital, factory or school if people cannot get to them and home again safely and affordably.

An effective integrated transport system, that brings all of the appropriate transport modes together, should enable our rural communities to be economically sustainable, reduce isolation, ensure access to goods and services, reduce mental health problems and reduce the difficulty in accessing care for physical health problems. This would ensure proper access for people and businesses to earn money and contribute to the economy. Things most urban areas already have, and that in rural areas are becoming bigger problems which are getting harder and more expensive to resolve.

National Assembly Enterprise & Business Committee Inquiry into the Future of the Wales & Borders Rail Franchise

The Committee has now received nearly 100 contributions to the Inquiry; submissions are available to view/download on www.senedd.assemblywales.org/mgIssueHistoryHome.aspx?IIId=7383.

Précis of the North Pembrokeshire Transport Forum Submission

Over the years concerns have been raised about the limitations in the current 15-year Wales and Borders Rail Franchise agreement. From the Forum's perspective the following have been of paramount concern:

1. *The requirement for the franchise to comply with existing passenger service levels.* The Rail Passengers Committee for Wales supported the Forum's call for additional services in the 2003 franchise, adding that the existing services were not fit for purpose and were of no real value to travellers to/from north Pembrokeshire.

Eighty percent of respondents to a Forum survey in 2004 rated the Fishguard train service as very poor or poor. More than half of the 245 respondents never used the train or used it on very few occasions; all but four provided examples of enhancements that would attract them onto the train.

Welsh Government funding in 2011 for additional Fishguard train services was only made possible (outside of the franchise agreement) after the 2005 Railways Act came into force. The provision of 'more regular, convenient services during the day' had been the top improvement called for by respondents to the Forum survey, and the 48% increase in passenger numbers in the first year of the additional services provided evidence that services operating at times that people wish or need to travel would attract more people onto the train.

The Forum endorses the support of the South West Wales Integrated Transport Consortium (SWWITCH) for the preservation and enhancement of Fishguard rail service levels among its Proposed Forward Rail Priorities, in order to maintain the behavioural change and modal shift which will have occurred as a result of the improved connectivity.

2. *The limited franchise subsidy levels.* Without funding from the Welsh Government additional Fishguard rail services could not have been provided. Regrettably there is no guarantee that funding for the additional Fishguard services will continue after the end of the 3-year trial period (2014), four years before the launch of the 2018 franchise.

3. *The exclusion of new stations or station improvements in the fixed annual payments.* Without funding provided outside of the current franchise settlement, Fishguard and Goodwick station would not have been re-opened. Funding for station improvements is of critical importance, as stations serve as multi-modal interchanges. The Forum endorses the Enterprise and Business Committee's recommendation that inter-modal integration should be a key component in the new Wales and Borders Franchise.

4. *The fact that funding for the franchise excluded the acquisition of new rolling stock.* Acquisition of improved rolling stock was ruled out in the current franchise agreement. In order to increase passenger numbers and bring about modal shift, the new franchise should not preclude acquisition of rolling stock, particularly rolling stock that is suitable for long distance services. The Forum endorses the focus on overcrowding, provision of information, facilities for disabled passengers, toilet facilities, luggage space, carriage of cycles, and the management of disruption made in the submission from the Public Transport Users Committee for Wales.

In closing, the North Pembrokeshire Transport Forum agrees with other contributors to the Inquiry who have put forward a convincing case that the new franchise needs to be one that meets passenger needs and promotes growth, while being flexible enough to react to changes in demand. The Forum also finds the arguments in favour of longer franchise lengths more convincing than those made by supporters of shorter franchises. Finally, the Forum considers that there is now enough evidence to justify continued provision of the additional Fishguard services and the inclusion of these services in the new franchise's passenger service requirements.

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The North Pembrokeshire Transport Forum is an independent voluntary group that works for the provision of an effective integrated transport system in the North Pembrokeshire area, promotes the benefits of public transport and works towards the greater use of public transport systems.

The Forum is a member of Bus Users UK Cymru, the Environmental Network for Pembrokeshire and the Pembrokeshire Rail Travellers Association.

The Forum's work is supported by:

Individual Members (£5 p.a.), Family Members (£8 p.a.) & Corporate Members (£12 p.a.)

(Corporate members include town and community councils, transport operators, and groups, organisations and associations with a transport interest)

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