



**To/
Councillor Andrew Stevens
Cabinet Member for Environment &
Infrastructure**

BY EMAIL

cc: Cabinet Members

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Scrutiny

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SPC/2023-24/7

07 December 2023

Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member following the meeting of the Committee on 14 November 2023. It is about the follow up on the Bus Services Scrutiny Working Group. A formal written response is not required.

Dear Councillor Stevens,

Follow up – Bus Services Scrutiny Working Group

The Committee takes responsibility for following up on previous Scrutiny Working Groups, to check on progress with the topic / issue(s) and response to any specific suggestions or recommendations made and agreed action coming out of the Scrutiny session.

At our Committee meeting in November, we followed up on the Bus Services Scrutiny Working Group, which conclude in March 2022, having originally met in July 2021. The Working Group had met to discuss issues including bus network coverage and levels of service, community transport provision and integration with other forms of transport. The Scrutiny Councillors involved in this activity highlighted the need for regular bus services to all areas of Swansea to reduce isolation and start a shift away from car use to using public transport. They emphasised the importance of bus companies and public transport more generally contributing to carbon emission reduction. The Working Group recommended that regular meetings are held between Councillors and First Cymru to raise and discuss issues and felt it was very important for the Authority and bus companies to listen to people who currently do not use buses in Swansea, as well as people who do, to help

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shape current and future bus services. The importance of joining up bus and rail times so services are more coordinated and the introduction of cross ticketing between bus and rail were also issues emphasised. The further meeting in March 2022 enabled discussion on developments including a trial of hydrogen buses, improvements to bus shelters, and the possibility of Council playing a bigger role in providing bus services. Councillors were pleased to hear about various projects and improvements planned, though felt that public dissatisfaction with services and their reliability remained a big issue.

Key issues for follow up was progress on:

- working with operators to improve network / service coverage, reliability, and public satisfaction
- fostering effective dialogue between Councillors and bus operators, as well as public feedback, to raise / discuss service issues
- integration / cross ticketing between bus and rail so services are more coordinated
- any developments in terms of Council playing greater role in provision of bus services
- carbon emission reduction / trial of hydrogen buses
- improvements to bus shelters

Thank you for providing an update report on progress since the Working Group, including update on issues raised by the Working Group and actions taken. This included reference to developments in relation to cleaner fuel buses, the bus service network and bus emergency schemes, bus and rail links and bus shelters. We thank lead officers for attending the meeting along with yourself to answer questions. We also appreciated the contributions made by Bev Fowles, Director of South Wales Transport / Vice-Chair of Coach and Bus Association Cymru, giving the Committee a perspective on things from a local SME bus service operator, particularly in terms of Welsh Government proposed reform / legislation on how bus services are provided in the future, including franchising local bus services. We noted that South Wales Transport has been a long-standing local bus service contractor for the Council.

Bus Service Cuts

We noted that there are planned changes to the legislative framework which underpins the provision of local bus services, with Welsh Government looking at new legislation which would lead to the current deregulated model of providing services, introduced in 1986, being replaced by a franchised model. You reported that it was anticipated that the new legislation and model will be introduced in 2025 at the earliest.

We heard that whilst there has been a progressive recovery of passenger numbers post-Covid, bus operators locally are reporting that there is still a degree of resistance to using bus services again, with passenger numbers only about 80% of those carried pre-Covid, and for concessionary pass holders it varies between 60% and 75% on individual services. Revenue shortfalls were covered by the Welsh Government's Bus Emergency Scheme (BES), however BES was replaced from July 2023 by the Bus Transition Fund (BTF), though the level of funding made available for the 2023/2024 Financial Year has reduced. As a consequence, bus operators have made cuts resulting in a reduction in the frequency of most services. Under the BTF, the Council, like all others across Wales, is now required to tender contracts for all of services that will continue to require funding from 1st April 2024. This will include the services which are not commercially viable but are deemed to be socially necessary, and for which the Council has traditionally provided funding. The available funding for 2024/25 is unlikely to increase.

This is clearly a difficult period for bus services impacting those who rely most on buses, and we recognised this is not just a local problem. From the point of view of operators, we heard that dealing with a fall in passenger numbers and bus service reorganisation across Wales was a double whammy, which required more funding for transition not less. It was noted that the Welsh Government model for bus franchising was along the same lines as how Transport for London operates, and potentially a positive change but it is important that there is a sustainable budget to make this a success. The view of the Director of South Wales Transport was that bus operators were not optimistic at this point, but hoped to be proved wrong. There was some concern raised as to whether the Transport for London franchising model could be applied to Wales given differences – the sheer volume of people moving around London compared with smaller urban and many rural areas here - and the risk that the new model would benefit larger operators, at the expense of SMEs.

Communication & Engagement

Whilst not being responsible for bus services, we asked about what dialogue there been with service providers over their cuts to services and what influence the Council has exerted on this issue. You reported that the Council has worked with bus operators (most of the commercial network is operated by First Cymru) to try to ensure that most areas retain a basic bus service. We were assured that dialogue between the Council and service providers continues, with regular meetings to discuss service issues, consistent with the existing Quality Bus Partnership agreement. Although it cannot help seeing frequent changes in senior management within First Cymru. Nevertheless, you stated that there is a good relationship.

One of the challenges we noted was that bus operators are free to change services or stop a route by giving 56 days' notice, and there is no requirement to formally consult users, which is not only difficult for passengers and communities, but leaves the Council with little time or room to react.

Transport Integration & Cross Ticketing

We asked about progress on joining up bus and rail times to improve co-ordination between services and cross ticketing. This is something that appears to be taking considerable time to implement.

We noted that cross ticketing would be part of the new franchise agreement and was expected to be rolled out in zones from April 2026 – similar to how the Oyster Card works in London. It was anticipated that in 3-5 years there would be significant improvements in connectivity between bus and rail transport. Transport for Wales were looking at integration to bring buses into railways stations. We heard some concerns around disproportionate national funding for rail versus bus transport, in view of relative passenger numbers.

We also discussed issues around the provision of Real Time Bus Information and would like to see this as part of future improvements.

Encouraging Bus Travel

We discussed the concerns around passenger numbers and ways to encourage bus usage.

We were pleased to hear that the Council's free travel initiative is making a difference, and hopefully funding will continue to support this. We were encouraged to hear that passenger numbers, whilst still below pre-Covid levels, were going up and the Council's action was giving people an incentive to try the bus and hopefully use again. It was noted that the Free Bus offer would be operational on weekends between now and Christmas and the week after Christmas.

We heard that fare caps have made a difference in England, but this is currently not available in Wales. We also heard that a Welsh Government led promotional campaign would also help to support bus recovery – something that was apparently planned but yet to materialise.

Your Response

We thank all concerned for the informative report and discussion, which now concludes our formal follow up of the Bus Services Scrutiny Working Group.

We hope that you find the contents of this letter helpful and would welcome comments, however we do not expect you to provide a formal response.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Black', written in a cursive style.

COUNCILLOR PETER BLACK
Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee
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