

# Rail's squeaky wheels get the most grease!

Operators from buses, rail and the community sector have their say on the yet to be published Welsh Transport Plan. **Richard Simpson** reports

**P**utting Passengers First: How Will the Welsh Transport Plan Deliver? was the theme of a conference hosted by Transport Focus Wales ahead of the publication of the Welsh Transport Plan at Cardiff City Hall.

Transport Focus is the independent passenger 'watchdog' for Great Britain, which has the objective of getting the best deal for transport users. It was rebranded from Passenger Focus in March this year, and was formed following the passage of the Railways Act of 2005 when the Regional Rail Passengers Committees and Rail Passengers Council were abolished.

Speakers to an audience of transport professionals and passengers included Peter Heath, Operations and Commercial Director at Cardiff Bus, Sian Summers-Rees, Director for Wales of the Community Transport Association and Ian Bullock, the Managing Director of Arriva Trains Wales.

Representing Transport Focus were Jeff Halliwell, chairman of Transport Focus, Anthony Smith, the Chief Executive of Transport Focus and Diane McCrea, the board member for Wales of Transport Focus.

Something which emerged very strongly from the conference was that rail passengers appeared far more vocal and effective in their campaigning than bus passengers were: whether they were complaining about service shortcomings or asking for more state support - although bus passengers considerably outnumbered rail users in terms of usage. The squeaky wheels (on trains) certainly get the most grease!

This was reflected in terms of state support each mode received. In fact, in his concluding remarks Mr Halliwell quipped that: "Given the amount of public subsidy they receive and passengers they carry, if you arrived here from Mars and were put in charge of public transport, the first thing you would do would be to replace all the trains with express coaches!"

Interestingly, as part of its rebranding from Passenger Focus to Transport Focus, the group now includes the English strategic road network in its remit: making it directly relevant

to coach operators as road users in their own right as well as transporters of passengers. This reform does not yet apply to Wales, but with issues surrounding the Severn Crossing and M4 to Newport never far from the top of the transport agenda it is clear that many users of the strategic road network for cross-border traffic would have plenty to say on the topic if they could.

Transport Focus Chief Executive Anthony Smith's presentation was entitled 'what do passengers want' and he was concerned with short-term delivery and long-term strategy.

He said the National Rail Passenger Survey (NRPS) provided some answers: with value for money tickets, available seats and sufficient trains at the times people wished to travel being the passengers' top priorities.

"The NRPS is the Gold Standard in customer satisfaction," he said. "People in the industry are focussed on it."

Over 47,000 passengers had taken part in the last National Bus Passenger Survey. This covered their journey experience, including the bus stop, time waiting for the bus, the time spent on the bus, the appearance of the vehicle and the behaviour of the driver as well as their overall satisfaction with the journey and how they rated it as value for money.

Ironically, it had covered England and Scotland, but not Wales. Year-on-year it showed small improvements in satisfaction across the piece. See [www.transportfocus.org.uk/research/publications/bus-passenger-survey-full-report-autumn-2014](http://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research/publications/bus-passenger-survey-full-report-autumn-2014)

He warned that pressure on funding for bus services outside major towns and cities would grow in coming years.

Transport Focus was talking to the Welsh Government about bus services and wanted to develop 'trust surveys' examining the relationship between bus passengers and bus operators. He thought non-paper surveys, such as those based on phone apps might be a future development.

Ian Bullock, Managing Director of Arriva Trains Wales, said his company was now 12 years into a 15-year contract to operate services



Blaenau Ffestiniog is an interchange between local bus services (the stops for which are behind the unit), the Conwy Valley railway line to Llandudno and the heritage Ffestiniog Railways to Porthmadog, the two foot gauge track of which can be seen in the foreground. **GARETH EVANS**



**Anthony Smith, Chief Executive of Transport Focus. RICHARD SIMPSON**



**Peter Heath, Operations and Commercial Director at Cardiff Bus. RICHARD SIMPSON**



**Diane McCrea, Board Member for Wales at Transport Focus. RICHARD SIMPSON**

**'In Wales buses carry 107m passengers per annum, and Cardiff Bus carries over 24m of these. The bus is not a mode of last resort'**

in the Principality.

"There is a full cost risk to Arriva and the subsidy falls by £2.5 million a year," he said.

"12 years ago, we were running 800 trains a day: now we run 956.

"The average age of our rolling-stock is 25 years, but some of the Pacer trains are nearly 40 years old.

"12 years ago, we carried 18m people a year: that's up to 31m now. That growth rate was not anticipated, or catered for in our contract."

Five key priorities were identified in the draft version of the forthcoming Welsh Government

Wales Transport Strategy, which informs the National Transport Plan. These are: economic growth, access to employment, tackling poverty, sustainable travel and, safety and access to services.

Arriva was addressing these issues.

"20% of our services are over and above our transport obligations, we're improving capacity on the rural parts of our network, we've helped deliver new stations, we support business through our work with CBI and Chambers of Commerce, and we support tourism through additional capacity, advertising campaigns

and working with Visit Wales and other local agencies," said Mr Bullock.

In terms of improving access to employment, Arriva facilitated 85,000 work and leisure journeys every day, employed around 2,100 people directly with 400 jobs created since 2003, provided apprenticeships and an intern scheme, supported over 200 Welsh companies through its supply base, had an award-winning people development programme and had introduced the UK's first 'flexible season ticket'.

It helped tackle poverty by offering some of the lowest fares in the UK, providing a

**'Reliability is the number one passenger requirement, but is often upset by the high levels of congestion that we experience in Cardiff. Services need to be carefully planned and we need bus priority measures that are effectively enforced'**



Cardiff Bus introduced 40 new buses last year, including these ADL Enviro200s. CHRIS NEWSOME



Ian Bullock, Managing Director, Arriva Trains Wales. RICHARD SIMPSON

half-hourly commuter service on the Merthyr line, re-opened the New Ebbw Vale and Vale of Glamorgan lines, ran local rail card and concessionary fares schemes, and reduced-cost advanced purchase fares.

Arriva had made all ticket offices fully accessible, was making more rail services fully accessible, was working with third-party groups such as Age Cymru, had assisted travel and Orange Wallet schemes and was publishing guidance for older and less mobile passengers.

It was now running further into England, with services penetrating as far as Cheltenham, Birmingham and Manchester.

"88.8% of our trains have to run within four minutes and 59 seconds of schedule, and this is assessed every four weeks," Mr Bullock said. "We are the second-best operator in the UK at getting our trains to run to the minute."

Provision of services is skewed towards south-east Wales, where 55% of total services are run. There are 247 railway stations in Wales: most unmanned, and considerable investment has been made in automated ticketing.

Running services in Wales posed particular challenges, Mr Bullock explained: "All usable trains will be thrown into service if there's a major event like a rugby match in Cardiff. We can expect to carry 40,000 - 50,000 people in the space of three hours if there's a major event at the Millennium Stadium."

Although Peter Heath, the Operations and Commercial Director of Cardiff Bus gave his presentation the upbeat title 'How the Bus Will Deliver', he acknowledged straight away that it was "the forgotten solution" in transport and was given scant regard in Welsh transport planning.

He hit back with some key figures: "We need to remember that in Wales buses carry 107m passengers per annum, and Cardiff Bus carries over 24m of these. The bus is not a mode of last resort."

"Contrast this with Arriva Trains Wales who carry 29m passenger per annum, and yet, which is considered the most important?"

Mr Heath pointed out that in terms of public support per passenger journey Arriva Trains Wales netted £5.10 of public money, buses in England £0.31, buses in London £0.25 and buses in Wales just £0.24.

"Yet," he said, "many politicians and members of the public consider rail to be more important: why?"

"Even the small amount of funding that bus operators get is fraught with problems. Revenue from the Welsh Government is on a year-by-year basis, but you need five years' funding to invest in new buses. And the funding is usually late..."

"There's a lot of discussion about concessionary fares being a subsidy, but actually they are reimbursement for lost revenue."

"There is a need for partnership between bus operators, local authorities and the Welsh Government. Each has key responsibilities."

"The bus operator provides product and business expertise, the local authority bus

priorities, a parking policy and land use planning, and the Welsh Government funding and a suitable regulatory framework."

"Reliability is the number one passenger requirement, but is often upset by the high levels of congestion that we experience in Cardiff. Services need to be carefully planned and we need bus priority measures that are effectively enforced. Currently Cardiff has a low level of bus priority, and traffic in Cardiff has a real impact on bus services. Buses need 95% punctuality...which is to run within five minutes of timetable."

"Congestion in the city is our number one problem. There's a lack of consistency and low level of bus lanes."

"Fares are a key element in attracting and

retaining passengers. It's difficult to get passengers to understand complex ticketing schemes. The essentials are simple-to-understand tickets that are easy to use and represent value for money. The fares structure must be stable, with increases kept to a minimum."

"We recently reduced the price of weekly tickets to get people out of their cars, and also have discounts for bulk purchases of single tickets - like Arriva Trains Wales!"

These offers include weekly tickets cut from £15 to £13, and a bulk purchase of 10 trips for £15 with no expiry date. Cardiff Bus now also has paperless ticketing via a mobile app.

"Real-time travel information is now taken for granted, but our real-time system is now 15 years old and needs replacing," Mr Heath said.

"We now see the future route in being through passengers' web-based devices, people will be able to see the time the next bus is due even before they leave home."

"All our new buses have Audio Visual (AV) next stop information systems. Whatever systems you do use have to be kept up-to-date or they are of no use at all. While there is a very broad age range now using various types of electronic media, there is still a need for the print medium in timetables."

"Bus operators need to ensure that they provided a quality product. This means a modern vehicle with a good 'whole customer experience' including on-bus WiFi, and the operator needs to measure 'where they are' in terms of customer perception."

"After six months of operation, Cardiff Bus' WiFi was attracting 40,000 users per week."

"We introduced 40 new buses last year and 20 this year, including some double-deckers, and we do our own customer satisfaction surveys



Sian Summers-Rees, Director for Wales at the Community Transport Association. RICHARD SIMPSON

every year.

"A bus service needs to be right and this means taking changing lifestyles regarding shopping and working into account."

"The internet means that there are now fewer shopping trips undertaken overall, but Sunday opening means more people are shopping on Sundays...our Sunday services are now the same as weekdays, and early evening services have expanded to allow for late-night shopping."

"Our future challenges include the closure of the bus station this year, and we are talking to property developers about the services that projected new housing developments will need. They may need to prime new services because we must operate at a profit. We need more facilities for Park & Ride too."

"There are other challenges...and opportunities: there's an aging population, increasing congestion, urban air quality problems (but no 'green bus' funding in Wales) and we need to get young wealthy car drivers into buses for some of their journeys."

"In all of these, even small amounts of funding can make a big difference."

Summarising, Mr Heath said: "By its inherent flexibility, the bus is best placed as the solution to serving the needs of the people, communities and businesses of Wales."

"It can underpin the National Transport Plan by giving an affordable, effective and efficient transport system."

"Bus funding must ensure maximum value for money and impact. Small bus expenditure can give major benefits to operations."

"Partnership is the key. No matter what the conditions, the bus is always here!"

In contrast to the commercial enterprise of Cardiff Bus, Sian Summers-Rees Director of Community Transport Association Wales outlined the role of her organisation. She emphasised that commercial operators could work with Community Transport schemes, which could, for example, provide feeder services for commercial bus routes, but in England there had been a degree of conflict with commercial operators who viewed CT as a threat.

"CTA is a UK-wide charity," she explained, "funded by the Welsh Government in Wales to promote Community Transport."

"Community Transport provides safe, accessible, cost-effective transport run by the community for the community to meet the need of those who have no access to other

forms of transport.

"It is focussed on the needs of individuals, and is not for profit at all," she emphasized.

"Community Transport organisations are generally small-scale and local, with a strong social ethos and a high level of volunteers."

"It was recognized that public transport was not for everyone particularly those with age-related health issues, disability or mobility issues, people in difficult locations where public transport was unsuitable or unavailable, those working shifts and those who were unable to afford the cost of other modes."

"It's about a personal service with accessible vehicles: for instance Community Transport minibuses can take a group of wheelchair users where a conventional 'accessible' bus might only have room for one or two."

The majority of services were offered in rural areas such as Powys and sometimes came into operation where supported bus services had been cut.

CT also provided 'Wheels for Work' for instance powered two-wheelers for shift workers and those living in rural areas who needed personal transport for employment.

Non-emergency hospital patient transport was an area of significant demand, but "CT will direct people to public transport where this is available and appropriate."

Diane McCrea explained Transport Focus' response to the Welsh National Transport Plan. She wanted greater connectivity between buses and trains, and the factors preventing more bus journeys to be addressed. There was a need to measure and compare bus passenger satisfaction in regular surveys throughout Wales.

Concluding the meeting, Anthony Smith, the Chief Executive of Transport Focus, said the latest Transport Plan would be a step in the right direction for Wales. There was a need to extend the bus passenger survey to Wales, and public transport's role in driving economic growth and opportunity in Wales needed to be recognized. Equally, poor access to public transport was a barrier to growth.

**Find out more about Transport Focus on [www.transportfocus.org.uk](http://www.transportfocus.org.uk)**  
**Consultation on the Draft National Transport Plan 2015 closed in March and the final Plan had yet to be published as CBW went to press. You can keep up with developments on [gov.wales/topics/transport/?lang=en](http://gov.wales/topics/transport/?lang=en)**