

P-06-1338 Extend the bus emergency scheme and develop national bus recovery plan – Correspondence from the petitioner to Committee, 16.04.24

Annwyl Jack Sargeant,

I would like to thank you, the committee and the committee clerks for the work you've done on my petition.

A lot has happened since this petition was created, most significant of which includes the end of the Bus Emergency Scheme and its successor Bus Transition Fund, the introduction of the Bus Network Grant and changes at a local level at the way buses are being delivered. In my own home area, a number of services that were cut last year have been reinstated during the contract negotiations between the Council and bus operators.

The reinstating of some services have already begun to make a difference, allowing some people to once again easily access schools, colleges, work, volunteering and key services.

With the bus bill that will be laid before the Senedd this year very much on the horizon, and work already being taken to lay the groundwork for a new model of bus delivery, the picture right now is quite different from what it was at this time last year.

That being said, there are still considerable challenges facing the sector. While passenger numbers may be slowly recovering, we are still not at pre-pandemic levels and certainly a long way off where we need to be to have a comprehensive and sustainable bus network.

After reading through the responses received from both the Older People's Commissioner, Helena Herklots, and Carolyn Thomas MS, I would like to express my thanks to them both and provide the committee with my response to some of the points they have raised.

Carolyn Thomas refers, quite rightly in my opinion, to the benefit that would come from a greater public control over bus services. However, public control should certainly be accompanied by public involvement. She will remember that at the last meeting of the Cross Party Group on Public Transport, that she chairs, I asked several questions to TfW and others about passenger involvement in the long promised bus campaign. Sadly, that campaign has been and gone with limited public engagement and involvement – I'd be very interested to know whether members of the committee noticed, and would certainly like to know if TfW and the Confederation of Passenger Transport felt that it made any impact?

Both letters to you make reference to the considerable impact being felt by passengers as a result of the challenges facing the network. The Older People's Commissioner talks about the impact on the health, wealth and wellbeing of many older people from loss of service and changing timetables and routes. The Commissioner also notes the lack of older person involvement (and passengers more broadly) in current conversations going on about how challenges are being met.

An example of a small group that have made a big difference is the Friends of the Number 65 Bus who, through creating a community of passengers, have helped people who had previously been regular passengers to get back onto the service.

I am considering establishing a similar group for passengers of the bus I catch every day, as the first service of the day has become a pseudo-coffee morning on wheels. If I do, I'm more than happy for any member of the committee to pay us a visit! I'm sure there are many others with similar groups, and it is disappointing that these groups and individuals have not been included as key stakeholders in how we collectively meet the challenge facing our services.

This is why I consider that the petition request for a national bus recovery plan, co-produced by passengers and other stakeholders is still one that should be acted upon by Welsh Government. While the funding going into services and the promise of the bus bill is certainly welcome, in the words of the Commissioner - *"action cannot be put off until legislation is passed and implemented."*

Once again, I want to thank you for your consideration of this petition.

Cofion gorau

Andrew