

# A New Wales Transport Strategy – Bevan Foundation Consultation Response

The Bevan Foundation is Wales' most influential think-tank. We aim to end poverty and inequality by working with people to find effective solutions and by inspiring governments, organisations and communities to take action. We are grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Welsh Government's consultation on its new transport strategy "Llwybr Newydd". Our extensive work on poverty and inequality provides us with some insights into the difficulties faced by those living in low income households, including accessing affordable transport. Our response draws on this experience. Given the large number of questions in the consultation document we have grouped some together and our response is set out in 5 sections below.

## 1. The 20 year ambition and the long term vision

The Bevan Foundation broadly agrees with the long term vision and the 20 year ambition set out in the Llwybr Newydd Strategy. In particular we welcome the ambition to develop a transport system where *"there are fewer physical, economic, social and attitudinal barriers that prevent people from walking, cycling or using public transport."*<sup>1</sup>

We are concerned however, that there is little set out by means of how this ambition would be achieved for people trapped in poverty beyond the Welsh Government committing to *"continue to support concessionary and discounted travel for the people who most need it"*.<sup>2</sup>

The Bevan Foundation has highlighted a number of concerns with the current approach to concessionary and discounted travel over recent years.

In the first instance concessionary services are not targeted at those most in need of support. Pensioners are the age group least likely to live in poverty in Wales. 19% of pensioners live in poverty, a proportion that is still too high and is rising, but which is less than the proportion of working age adults living in poverty, 22%, and significantly less than the proportion of children living in poverty which stands at 28%.<sup>3</sup> This means that whilst there are thousands of over 60s benefitting from free bus travel who are not in poverty, there may be thousands of working age adults trapped in poverty who do not get access to the same support.

A second concern that the Bevan Foundation has raised in recent years is that the current approach to concessionary and discounted travel may be distorting when public transport is made available and may be pushing some working age adults into poverty. Subsidising the demand of retired people, who now comprise more than half of bus passengers, means that bus services are heavily skewed towards what those people want – which is

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<sup>1</sup> Welsh Government, *Llwybr Newydd – a new Wales Transport Strategy*, (17 November 2020) Ambition S1, Section 2.1

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> Stats Wales, *Percentage of all individuals, children, working-age adults and pensioners living in relative income poverty for the UK, UK countries and regions of England between 1994-95 to 1996-97 and 2016-17 to 2018-19 (3 year averages of financial years)*, available at - <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Community-Safety-and-Social-Inclusion/Poverty/householdbelowaverageincome-by-year>

daytime services to town centres or nice leisure destinations. This means that there are significant gaps in bus provision outside the hours of 9 to 4 or to out of town areas such as industrial estates, meaning that it is difficult for many people who work in low paid roles at standard office hours to access their jobs, let alone those who work a-typical hours. Such barriers may lock some people out of work completely, significantly increasing their risk of living in poverty.

A third issue that the Bevan Foundation has uncovered concerns home to education travel for those in post 16 education.<sup>4</sup> Whilst all young people aged 16 -21 can apply for My Travel Pass, which offers 1/3 off bus fares, young people in some parts of Wales are provided with free bus to and from their school or college. Others provide young people with a bus pass that permits them to travel free or at a discounted rate on public busses when travelling to college, whilst other authorities provide no assistance to students unless they have educational needs that mean that travel assistance must continue to be provided. This uneven approach means that young people in some parts of Wales face significantly greater barriers when it comes to accessing education than their peers in other parts of the nation.

Even in those local authority areas where young people are provided with free home to school/ college bus transport there are problems with the current system. The free transport does not always fit around student timetables, and a number of the young people the Bevan Foundation has spoken to have raised concerns about the cost of transport outside regular hours.<sup>5</sup> Young people from higher income families were able to travel to college more flexibly, by driving, catching the train or public bus. This permitted them to take on part time work if they had a free morning or afternoon and gave them greater flexibility to stay on at the college at the end of the day to attend extracurricular activities. These options were not available to young people on low incomes.

It is because of these inherent limitations with a concessionary and discounts based approach that the Bevan Foundation believes that the key to removing economic barriers to people using public transport is the greater provision of bus services, at an affordable cost for all. We have therefore called on the Welsh Government to:

- guarantee the provision of a network of core bus services, connecting communities with town centres and key facilities e.g. hospitals;
- introduce a standard fare for everyone, irrespective of age (e.g. 50p for short journeys and £1 for longer trips).<sup>6</sup>

We believe that by making the continuation of concessionary and discounted travel the main tool through which the Welsh Government proposes to ensure that there are no barriers to public transport, it is unlikely to achieve its ambition.

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<sup>4</sup> Bevan Foundation, *Learning a living, better support for post-16 learners* (February 2020) available at - <https://www.bevanfoundation.org/publications/learning-a-living-better-support-for-post-16-learners/>

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Bevan Foundation, *Transforming Wales: how Welsh public services and benefits can reduce poverty and inequality* (October 2020) available at - <https://www.bevanfoundation.org/publications/transforming-wales-welsh-public-services-and-benefits/>

## 2. 5 year priorities

Whilst we broadly agree with the priorities identified for the next 5 years we do believe that they lack detail and on occasion may have overlooked some key factors. For example, we do not believe that the priorities for the next 5 years fully take into account some of the lessons we have learned from the Covid 19 pandemic.

Priority 1, “*Planning for Better Connectivity*” places a significant emphasis on improving opportunities to work from home, or near to home. Whilst this focus is welcome, the pandemic has highlighted that not everyone enjoys the same opportunity to work from home. There is now a body evidence that demonstrates that it is the people on the highest incomes that have most been able to work from home throughout the pandemic.<sup>7</sup> This has real implications for household income and transport use.

In December 2020 YouGov ran a survey on behalf of the Bevan Foundation looking at the economic impact on the pandemic on Welsh households. Amongst one of the survey’s most startling findings was that whilst over 75% of households with a household income of more than £70,000 a year had seen their total expenditure on transport costs reduce since March 2020, the same was only true of 32% of households with an income of less than £10,000 and 42% of households with an income of between £10,000 and £29,999.<sup>8</sup> It is therefore absolutely vital that a strong, effective and affordable public transport network is retained and developed so that people who can’t work from home are able to get to their place of work via public transport, at an affordable cost. In this context it is positive to see the strategy commit to “*continue to support socially necessary bus and rail services in Wales*”.

Related to this we are concerned that the focus of the 5 year priorities, especially, the three refined priorities, is very much on attracting new users to public transport with little focus on existing public transport users. Clearly driving a modal shift is important, not least from an environmental perspective, but as the strategy sets out 23% of the Welsh population are already reliant on public transport or active travel as a result of not having access to a car. It is vital that any change in service prioritises the needs of people who are unable to travel by other means, rather than developing a system that may increase the total number of service users but exclude those who most rely on them.

## 3. The high level measures

We believe that the high level measures set out in the strategy are broadly the correct. However, the strategy should make a more explicit reference to measuring affordability in our opinion. Whilst measures M1 and M9 make some reference to factors that may be relevant to capturing affordability, we believe that the affordability of services for people on low income are so important they should form their own measure. One possible measure would be to calculate the proportion of people spending more than an hour’s salary at the National Living Wage on a return journey to and from work.

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<sup>7</sup> ONS, *Which jobs can be done from home* (21 July 2020) available at - <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/whichjobscanbedonefromhome/2020-07-21>

<sup>8</sup> Some more information can be found at – Bevan Foundation *A snapshot of poverty in winter 2020* (December 2020) available at - <https://www.bevanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/A-snapshot-of-poverty-in-winter-2020.pdf>

A second factor to consider with regard to the high level measures is that many are based on people's satisfaction with the services on offer. If satisfaction will only be measured based on the views of people who access services then there is a risk that the voices of people who are excluded from accessing public transport due to cost, availability and adequacy concerns are not heard, meaning that weakness within the system may go unaddressed. It is therefore vital that the high level measures considers how these voices will be heard as the strategy is reviewed going forward, in particular the voices of people with protected characteristics and people who are trapped in poverty.

#### 4. Should there be specific targets to get for more people to travel by sustainable transport?

As already discussed we do believe that it is correct that the Welsh Government's new transport strategy has a focus on increasing the number of people choosing to travel by sustainable means. It is equally important however, that this aim does not mean that the strategy leads to transport services being put into place that increases the overall number of people using sustainable transport but at the expense of people who are already reliant on these services, in particular people who are on low incomes.

We therefore believe that if specific targets are introduced they need to be far more nuanced. One option would be to set targets around increasing the number of people from low income households and the number of people with protected characteristics who use sustainable transport. One potential shortcoming with this approach however, is that it may not capture accurately whether more people are using transport services because they want to as the quality of the service has improved, or whether more people are using public transport because they have no choice. This is especially prescient given expectations that the economic impact of Covid 19 will lead to more people living in poverty. Any target to increase transport use must therefore be accompanied by targets to improve its reliability, affordability, frequency and comfort.

#### 5. Identified actions and mini plans for each transport mode

We welcome many of the actions and mini plans set out in the strategy and are particularly pleased to see a focus on investing in the bus network and on the introduction of legislation which will give the public sector more control over bus services. Given the large investment in rail that the strategy is committed to, in particular through the delivery of the South Wales Metro, and the historic underinvestment in our bus services we do think there is space to go further.

The number of journeys taken by bus in Wales has actually fallen over the last twenty years. In 1996/97 133 million journeys were made by local bus in Wales. By 2018/19, however, that number had fallen by nearly a quarter to 102 million.<sup>9</sup> Long term underinvestment in bus services is one factor that is likely to be a reason for this.<sup>10</sup> For example, prior to Covid 19 the Bus Services Support Grant had remained unchanged at £25m since its introduction in 2013/14 a real terms cut of over £4m. Whilst there has been some modest additional spending by the Welsh Government on "Bus Support" and

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<sup>9</sup> Stats Wales, *Number of passenger journeys on local bus services by Great Britain country and year* available at - <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Transport/rail/rail-transport/railpassengerjourneystofromwithinwalesandtotaljourneysingb-by-year>

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

concessionary fares over the course of this Senedd, these merely counteract the real terms cut to the Bus Services Support Grant rather than significantly increase the funds available.

Even allowing for this however, bus travel is by far the most popular form of public transport in Wales. Approximately 31 million journeys were made by rail in Wales in 2018/19, with the figure dropping to 22 million for journeys made within Wales.<sup>11</sup> The number of people travelling locally by bus is therefore nearly 80% higher than the number of people travelling by train. The number of people travelling by rail has doubled over the same time period, however, demonstrating the impact that investment and the provision of greater services can have on use.

Given that, despite the lack of investment in our bus network over recent decades that it remains by far the most popular mode of public transport in Wales, we believe that it is important that the strategy makes it explicit that the Welsh Government will significantly increase its investment in the bus network. Without doing so, we believe that the strategy will be less effective in reaching its broader ambitions.

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<sup>11</sup> Stats Wales, *Rail passenger journeys to, from or within Wales and total journeys in Great Britain by year*, available at - <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Transport/rail/rail-transport/railpassengerjourneystofromwithinwalesandtotaljourneysingb-by-year>