

<b>NAME OF SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</b>	Communities Scrutiny Committee
<b>DATE OF MEETING</b>	13 July 2023
<b>TITLE</b>	Update - Developments in Public Transport
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<b>CABINET MEMBER</b>	Councillor Dafydd Meurig
<b>PURPOSE</b>	To update the Committee on upcoming work for members' consideration

## 1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 In a large, rural county, ensuring high quality public transport options is crucial to enable Gwynedd residents to travel in a sustainable manner.
- 1.2 A substantial proportion of Gwynedd residents rely on public transport to reach work, school or college, medical appointments and for shopping and recreational purposes. However, due to the rural nature of Gwynedd and the travel distances, public transport routes tend to require assistance in order to be viable.
- 1.3 Most public transport services in Gwynedd, currently receive an element of subsidy (partial or full) of public funding.
- 1.4 The field of public transport has been prioritised in the Council Plan 2023-8. There is a clear vision of reviewing "our existing public transport provision with the aim of developing a public transport network that will be convenient, reliable and reasonably priced to allow the residents of Gwynedd to travel every day of the week."
- 1.5 This report offers an update on the report submitted to the Communities Scrutiny Committee on 15 September 2022 (Appendix 1), noting the main matters in relation to public transport in Gwynedd, what is currently being developed and future plans for the network.
- 1.6 As noted in the report to the Scrutiny Committee in September 2022, the Welsh Government provided unprecedented support to assist the bus sector to ensure that services continued throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 1.7 The support of the Government's Bus Emergency Scheme (BES) was crucial to enable operators to keep customers and a network of services that otherwise could have been lost or substantially reduced.
- 1.8 With the BES scheme coming to an end on 24 July, the Welsh Government has announced a Bus Transition Fund financial package, which was developed jointly with Councils and Transport for Wales that will run until April 2024.

- 1.9 Council Transport Service officers have been collaborating closely with Transport for Wales representatives on a regional basis and have outlined the support that would be required to ensure the continuation of services. We await the exact level of support for the current financial year.
- 1.10 Thanks to this important work, which has included regular discussions with providers, there will be no substantial changes to the bus network managed by the Council, and there will be some improvement in the level of service provided in some areas.
- 1.11 Council officers continue to hold regular meetings with Transport for Wales and the Welsh Government to influence the financial package beyond April 2024 and are forward planning for the next period. There is currently no assurance regarding the level of support that will be available.

## **2. NEW NETWORK**

- 2.1 The Council's Transport Service has been collaborating closely with Transport for Wales to review and plan a new network for Gwynedd. The work is now proceeding to integrate new services into our network.
- 2.2 As a result of this joint planning, we have secured financial assistance to invest in aspects of a new network in the current financial year. This work is continuing, and we hope that this forward planning will enable us to stabilise the network and mitigate the impact of any change in funding levels from the Government on operators.
- 2.3 This collaboration with Transport for Wales has secured additional funding for Gwynedd for the current year. Whilst this offers an opportunity to improve our network, Transport for Wales is currently offering a year-on-year commitment.
- 2.4 As a result of this important work from Council officers jointly with Transport for Wales, a new network of services offering standard timetables has commenced in the Caernarfon and Dyffryn Nantlle area. We will continue to work on other areas over the coming months.
- 2.5 The Dyffryn Nantlle area experienced a substantial reduction in provision when a local company went out of business, and we were eager to invest in this network as 18% of the population of the Llanllyfni ward had no other mode of transport (Census 2021 data, ons.gov.uk).
- 2.6 The new network of services offers standard timetables for the areas of Talysarn, Nantlle, Llanllyfni and Nebo. The timetables have been prepared to be convenient to follow and promote with regular departure times and offer connections to the T22/T2 services in Penygroes and/or Caernarfon. The services have been established this year via additional Transport for Wales funding, but there is currently no assurance of funding beyond March 2024. Officers are continuing discussions with Transport for Wales.
- 2.7 There are also plans to develop the network in other areas and officers are continuing with this work, with the intention of linking with Transport for Wales plans to re-tender TrawsCymru services, which will be operational during the autumn.

- 2.8 Close collaboration with Transport for Wales has enabled the Council to introduce additional services to what would have been possible otherwise, and officers will continue to build on this important work.
- 2.9 The financial risk to the Council should be noted as Transport for Wales can only commit to fund the new network for this financial year at present. This means there is a possibility that we will not be able to continue with the new network if we do not receive additional support next year.
- 2.10 The Council will soon be expected to re-tender services as it has been several years since some providers were tendered. As costs have increased significantly since then, we must be alive to the fact that prices will be substantially higher when re-tendering.
- 2.11 The Service overspends £300,000 per year to fund the network that has been in place for several years, and the re-tendering timetable has been delayed as it was not possible to proceed during the Covid period.
- 2.12 Whilst understanding that there is a need to look at the next period beyond the support offered via BES grants, it is clear that bus companies require need support for the next few years in order to stabilise the network.

### **3. SHERPA'R WYDDFA**

- 3.1 The success of Sherpa'r Wyddfa services since its re-launch is evidence of how modernising services to address users' needs can develop a quality network in challenging circumstances.
- 3.2 Council staff have been working very closely with Transport for Wales to introduce a quality service to residents in Eryri and beyond, along with visitors to the area. The service was recently re-tendered for five years, commencing on 1 April 2023 until 31 March 2028 and we are monitoring its development and performance.
- 3.3 It was decided to standardise the price of tickets on the network as there was considerable inconsistency - historically, price tables were adopted from one operator to the other.
- 3.4 Since April, the service links the mountains of Eryri to the sea, with the S4 service extending from Pen-y-Pass through Beddgelert and Porthmadog, passing Borth-y-Gest to y Greigddu, Morfa Bychan. Additional provision is also available between Beddgelert and Pen-y-Pass to mitigate parking problems on the road - with an hourly service on weekends and school holidays being trialled there this year.
- 3.5 Thus far, the response has been extremely positive, with the number of passengers in May up 44% compared to 2022 and up 62% compared to May 2019 [Pre covid].
- 3.6 We hope that this will make the network very attractive when the time comes to re-tender again in five years and, therefore, to bring the cost down for the taxpayer. The increase in the number of passengers is quite astounding - the table below shows an increase of 30% in April 2023 compared to April 2022, namely 11,685 passengers (NB contract commenced on 09/04/22 compared to 01/04/23, therefore, 8 fewer days of operation). When looking at the April – June 2023 period, there is an increase of 35% compared with the same period last year (Table 1).

**Table 1**

<i>Passengers</i>	<i>2019-20</i>	<i>2021-22</i>	<i>2022-23</i>	<i>2023-24</i>
<i>April</i>	30,364	14,581	38,351	50,036
<i>May</i>	36,681	24,699	41,192	59,348
<i>June</i>	33,253	36,929	42,324	55,018
<i>July</i>	40,485	41,482	48,620	
<i>August</i>	40,083	43,280	56,909	
<i>September</i>	32,974	34,114	41,669	
<i>October</i>	30,165	25,486	29,154	
<i>November</i>	23,153	17,465	20,755	
<i>December</i>	20,138	14,172	17,745	
<i>January</i>	21,269	14,941	18,255	
<i>February</i>	20,006	15,331	20,462	
<i>March</i>	15,031	21,863	23,650	
	343,602	304,343	399,086	164,402

- 3.7 With four partners contributing towards the Sherpa, there is a risk to the network should one of the stakeholders decide not to fund the service. As Transport for Wales can only commit their funding from year to year, a Service Level Agreement is in place for the contract term (namely, five years), with a formal notice required of (at least) six months before any Partner can terminate the agreement.

#### **4. TRAWSCYMRU AND ELECTRIC BUSES**

- 4.1 The TrawsCymru bus services are an important component of the integrated public transport network in Wales - as part of the long-distance journeys and as local bus services.
- 4.2 The buses are funded by the Welsh Government and provide essential links in terms of public transport for many communities across Wales. They link to railway services and offer an accessible, affordable and environmentally friendly mode of travel for visitors, which enables them to enjoy Wales' spectacular views.
- 4.3 It is expected that the new T22 service will operate from the autumn, serving Blaenau Ffestiniog - Caernarfon via Porthmadog, and this with four new electric buses that will operate from a purpose-built site in Porthmadog.
- 4.4 This is an exciting development for the network in Gwynedd and we will monitor the electric buses and consider how we can make use of similar buses in other parts of the network in future.
- 4.5 Due to the financial situation and lack of competition from companies, it is possible that the cost of maintaining the service will be higher than the current services along the route.
- 4.6 Our work of anticipating the operating costs is encouraging at present but it is difficult to anticipate how companies will respond to the proposal of an 'operate and maintain' contract, which is the first of its kind in Gwynedd. We have received specialist support to try to reduce the financial risk to the Council and have also tried to mitigate the market's impact on costs e.g. taking a risk on electricity supply for the contract's first year.

- 4.7 Transport for Wales is taking responsibility for the T2 (Bangor - Aberystwyth) and T3 (Abermaw - Wrexham) services from 4 September 2023 onwards. They are currently out to tender for two years with the intention of re-tendering for hybrid or electric buses afterwards.

## **5. REGIONAL AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS**

### **5.1 The national context**

- 5.1.1 The Welsh Government has noted a clear ambition to see fewer private vehicles travelling on the roads and an independent roads review underlines the desire to develop sustainable modes of transport.

- 5.1.2 When responding to the independent roads review, the Government noted:  
*"Reducing and re-prioritising our investment on new road schemes and increasing our investment in sustainable modes will assist modal shift, but it will also deliver wider benefits. These include less air pollution, more successful town and neighbourhood centres and a transport system that is accessible and fair for all. We recognise that this is a big and difficult change, that it won't happen overnight, and it requires us to work collaboratively, across government and beyond."*

- 5.1.3 Whilst understanding this ambition, it is clear that a substantially higher investment will be required in alternative modes of transport, including long-term support for public transport provision. The implications of this in a rural county such as Gwynedd are different to more urban cities where provision and service is very different.

### **5.2 North Wales Transport Commission**

- 5.2.1 The Welsh Government has established the North Wales Transport Commission to investigate the problems, the opportunities, the challenges and aims to ensure a sustainable and integrated transport system in north Wales.

- 5.2.2 It is expected that the Commission will publish its final report in the autumn. In the meantime, the [North Wales Transport Commission](#) has published an interim report, which includes draft recommendations.

- 5.2.3 The interim report acknowledges: "Travel patterns and options are very different in rural areas, and we understand that not all car journeys can be made by other means. What will work for an urban area will not necessarily apply to a remote location.

- 5.2.4 In terms of buses specifically, it is noted that legislative changes and introducing a franchise model would be crucial to improve services across the region. An effective core bus network should be operated from main travel corridors where there is no railway option to link communities and employment areas, providing a good frequency of services and longer and more consistent operating hours.

- 5.2.5 Reference is also made to the fact that there would be a combination of local routes timetabled with dynamic transport services that respond to the demand effectively when providing access to the core public transport network for people in rural areas.

- 5.2.6 The final report and recommendations of the Commission are expected in the autumn and Department officers will consider any recommendations as the work of developing the new network proceeds.

### **5.3 Corporate Joint Committee**

- 5.3.1 The functions of the Corporate Joint Committee (CJC) for north Wales came into force on 30 June 2022. It includes a statutory requirement to produce a new Regional Transport Plan (RTP). The CJC will then be required to review the plan formally every three years and produce a new plan every five years.
- 5.3.2 Delivering the projects and actions included in the RTP will continue to be the responsibility of all local authorities where those projects/actions have been located.
- 5.3.3 It is currently not entirely clear what the implications of this is for public transport services on a county level, but the Council will seek to influence the contents of the RTP to ensure that it meets the needs of Gwynedd.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

- 6.1 The report is submitted to the Communities Scrutiny Committee as an update on the work that has been achieved thus far when developing the new network, and the challenges of future planning in the context of the uncertainty regarding financial support in the mid-term and beyond.