



Accessing Health Services in Wales: Transport Issues and Barriers - Summary of findings and action to date

Before the world around us changed so drastically due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Commissioner and her team met with older people as part of engagement sessions throughout Wales. Concerns were frequently raised about the barriers older people often faced in accessing health services due to issues relating to transport.

Alongside issues relating to the loss of or changes to transport provision, particular concerns were also often raised about the transport difficulties created when health services were changed or relocated but suitable transport provision was not developed alongside those plans to ensure that they could then be accessed by older people.

Due to the potential impact of these kinds of issues upon older people's access to health services and, ultimately, their health and well-being the Commissioner set out to capture the views and experiences of older people and stakeholders throughout Wales to explore them in more detail, which form the basis of this report.

The Commissioner would like to thank all of the older people who contributed to the report by completing the survey or giving of their time to participate on one of the focus group sessions held throughout Wales. Thanks also goes to the stakeholders who provided helpful evidence based on their experiences, and shared examples of good practice, some of which are included in the report.

The report was due to be published in March, but its publication was delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown, which has not only had a significant impact upon the availability of and delivery of health services and public and community transport but has also generated a huge amount of discussion and debate about what the future of these services might look like.

So as we begin to look to the future and consider the ways that health services and transport services could change as we move forward, action to tackle the issues identified within this report is perhaps more important than ever to ensure that older people do not face any barriers.

The survey highlighted the significant barriers and difficulties faced by older people when travelling to health services, often as a result of the limited transport options available to them and issues related to quality, accessibility, and reliability.

Whilst some examples of good practice were identified, it is clear that a range of actions is needed to improve the experiences of older people when they travel by public transport to health services, particularly for those who do not have access to a car.

Access to public and community transport

Older people shared their concerns and frustrations around the loss of public transport, particularly away from the major routes where the availability and reliability of bus services is often scarce. This often results in a lack of trust in public transport services and means that many older people opt to travel to their health appointment by private vehicle, often at significant personal expense.

In areas where public transport services are available, a lack of basic facilities, such as shelters, seating and timetable information makes travel an uncomfortable and difficult experience.

In other areas community transport often replaces public transport and is highly valued where it is available, with a range of innovative schemes underway in different parts of Wales. However, concerns were also shared around the limited availability and visibility of community transport services in some areas.

The Commissioner was pleased to have early engagement opportunity with officials in Welsh Government who were developing the draft of the Wales Transport Strategy – Llwybr Newydd and was able to share much of the findings from this report with the team. It is reassuring that on being published for consultation much of that which had been shared was factored into the draft strategy.

Non-Emergency Patient Transport

Older people raised concerns about the process of booking the transport where the eligibility of the individual was assessed by the call handler. These concerns were often related to the ways their eligibility is determined, and the criteria being used to make these decisions.

Many older people who had used hospital transport also expressed their concerns regarding its reliability and had experiences of being picked up late for an appointment. Others highlighted the amount of time they had to spend travelling or waiting, and the fact that some journeys took all day, despite them only having a short appointment. This was

particularly concerning for carers who had arranged temporary cover while they attended their appointment.

Older people also shared their concerns around hospital transport not allowing carers or escorts to travel to appointments with their loved one, sometimes resulting in the patient not attending.

Since work began on this report it is reassuring that the Welsh Ambulance Service NHS Trust (WAST) has implemented the modernisation agenda and that many of the concerns raised have been addressed.

As part of that implementation of the modernisation agenda call handling procedures have been reviewed as were the issues of lengthy transit times and the situation around escorts being allowed to travel with a vulnerable patient.

It is also welcomed that measures have been put in place to ensure that those enquirers who are deemed not to be eligible to use non-emergency patient transport are now signposted to alternative provision such as a community transport service.

Information and timetables

Older people highlighted the difficulties and frustrations caused by a lack of information available about bus routes, timetables, and community transport.

Whilst much of this information is available online, many older people are unable to access it, and there is low awareness of the Welsh Government's free Traveline Cymru service, which is not widely utilised by older people for assistance with journey planning.

The importance of accurate and timely information was also discussed with the team drafting the Transport Strategy and it is welcomed that the availability of information is identified within the strategy including information about community transport to assist with journey planning. It is also welcomed that the strategy recognises that the information being provided needs to be accessible to those who do not use digital technology.

Engagement and Consultation

Older people shared their concerns and frustrations that they often felt that changes were happening to their health services without due consideration being given to the concerns they raised about the lack of transport planning.

This is particularly worrying given the changes that are currently underway within both primary and secondary health service provision, with the relocation of GP surgeries into

community hubs and greater centralisation of some specialist secondary health services causing anxiety and concern amongst older people.

Many older people were very concerned that their views about proposed developments and the potential access and transport issues they highlighted throughout consultation processes had not been given sufficient consideration or had been disregarded altogether.

Looking ahead

Without action to tackle the issues identified many older people throughout Wales are at risk of needlessly becoming unwell, potentially reaching a crisis point and requiring further, more intensive interventions; without action, many older people are at risk losing their independence and quality of life.

The delay to the publication of this report has however presented opportunities in the interim to influence the drafting of the new Wales Transport Strategy – to identify the good practice that's already being delivered, to increase the availability of innovative, flexible and responsive transport options that support older people to access the health services, and other services they may need. In developing and shaping improved transport services, it's essential that older people are engaged and consulted with in a meaningful way and that their experiences and concerns are heard and responded to.

The Commissioner gave Llywybr Newydd: the Welsh Transport Strategy 2021¹ a cautious welcome when it was published for consultation earlier this year and welcomed in particular the commitment to grow public transport use, maintain and further develop socially necessary bus and rail services, deliver a better passenger experience, ensure improved reliability and frequency of bus services, and to be responsive to user feedback and input and to ensure it informs planning and integration across different modes of transport.

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly changed the landscape for public and community transport providers and for those older people who relied on those services. Many services have been running with reduced capacity and limited timetables during this period and many older people who had been regular users of transport services, have been cautious to return to their regular activities. Many of these older people have been shielding or self-isolating for many months and require support to rebuild their confidence.

Regaining the trust of those older people who have felt let down in the past and convincing them of the renewed reliability and efficiency of the public transport system is a task that must be incorporated into the local and national delivery plans. Similarly, work needs to be done to give those who have kept away from public transport during the pandemic confidence that they can safely re-engage with services.

The draft strategy's inclusion of community transport in the wider provision of public transport was welcomed, as was the rolling out of new initiatives such as Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) and Integrated Responsive Transport (IRT) models. Many older people rely on community transport, particularly if they live in a rural area or do not have access to their own private vehicle.

The Equalities and Human Rights Commission in their 2020 report on Accessible Public transport for older and disabled people in Wales². highlighted concerns similar to those shared with the Commissioner about accessibility issues, the lack of information to assist with journey planning and the need for mandatory disability, equality and assistance training for frontline staff. The report recommends that the Welsh Government in implementing the new transport strategy for Wales should - 'demonstrate leadership to other public bodies, by showing due regard to the Public Service Equality Duties (PSED) and the Wales specific duties, and applying these effectively'

Finally, whilst the vision within Llwybr Newydd is welcomed, its success will depend on the effective development and implementation of the National Transport Delivery Plan (NTDP) and the Regional and Local Transport Plans. Those plans must reflect the voice of transport users, including older people, and have within them realistic milestones against which progress can be measured. The intention to establish a Representative Transport Advisory Group is welcomed and should contribute positively towards informing and monitoring the delivery of this strategy, progress will need to be effectively communicated to service users and the public.

The Commissioner welcomed the earlier discussions and meetings that were held with officials at the Welsh Government during the drafting of the strategy and will continue to work constructively with the Welsh Government and Transport for Wales as a member of the Transport for Wales Advisory Panel to ensure that the voice of older people is heard and their needs are reflected within future delivery plans.

The Accessing Health Services in Wales: Transport Issues and Barriers – Older People's Experiences report is available here:

[https://www.olderpeoplewales.com/en/news/news/21-08-12/Accessing Health Services in Wales Transport Issues and Barriers.aspx](https://www.olderpeoplewales.com/en/news/news/21-08-12/Accessing%20Health%20Services%20in%20Wales%20Transport%20Issues%20and%20Barriers.aspx)

¹ GOV.WALES. 2021. *Llwybr Newydd: the Wales Transport Strategy 2021*

² EHRC (2020) *Accessible public transport for older and disabled people in Wales*

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales protects and promotes the rights of older people throughout Wales, scrutinising and influencing a wide range of policy and practice to improve their lives. She provides help and support directly to older people through her casework team and works to empower older people and ensure that their voices are heard and acted upon. The Commissioner's role is underpinned by a set of unique legal powers to support her in reviewing the work of public bodies and holding them to account when necessary.

The Commissioner is taking action to end ageism and age discrimination, stop the abuse of older people and enable everyone to age well.

The Commissioner wants a Wales where older people are valued, rights are upheld and no-one is left behind.

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