

## The 'vicious circle of decline': How is congestion affecting the Welsh bus sector?

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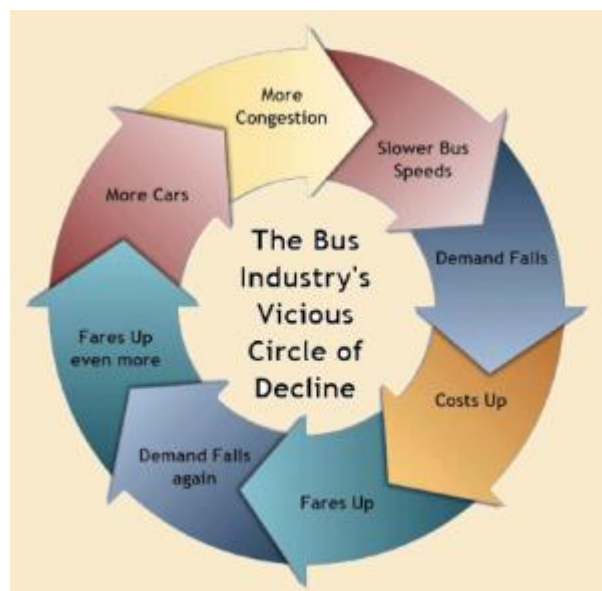
Bus companies in Welsh cities are struggling with congestion chaos that lengthens journey times and pinches passenger numbers, according to [evidence submitted](#) to an [Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee's](#) inquiry into the impacts of congestion on the bus industry.

According to a 2016 report considering the [impact of congestion on bus passengers](#) (PDF 2.5MB) at a UK level by Professor David Begg for Greener Journeys, the industry is caught up in a 'vortex', or 'vicious circle', which threatens to 'destroy' the bus industry through a spiral of declining reliability, reducing customer demand and higher fares.

In his foreword to Professor Begg's report, Sir Peter Hendy emphasised the importance of reliability and journey speed, stating that even "the best bus operation in the world would be sabotaged if congestion destroys reliability and journey speed".

### The congestion conundrum

The impact of congestion on the bus industry is an issue of concern for bus operators and was discussed at length during Wales' first Welsh Government [bus summit](#) held in January 2017. Registered bus services in Wales decreased by approximately 46%, from 1,943 services to 1,058 between March 2005 and March 2015. The number of bus passenger journeys declined by about 19% between 2008 and 2015.



A June 2015 report on the Economics of the Bus Operation in Wales by the [TAS Partnership](#) (TAS) for [Confederation of Passenger Transport](#) (CPT) Cymru identified a 'significant fall in productivity in the industry over the last decade' fuelled by 'increased congestion and demand for road space'.

## Pollution problems

Professor Begg's report highlights that slow buses are not only bad for business but also for pollution, with 'stop-start conditions caused by congestion' contributing to a 25% rise in carbon dioxide emissions per bus km in the UK since 2000.

Poor air quality is thought to [contribute to 1,300 premature deaths in Wales](#) each year. In England, a [Clean Air Zone framework](#) which highlights the role of reduced traffic congestion in achieving clean air has been established. In Wales, the UK [consultation on tackling nitrogen dioxide in our towns and cities](#) states that the Welsh Government will consult on detailed proposals for a Clean Air Zone Framework for Wales within the next 12 months.

A Greener Journeys report on [Improving Air Quality in Towns and Cities](#) published in April 2017 stated that buses are an integral part of the solution to air quality issues, and the role of the bus must be maximised.



## The economics

### Funding in Wales

Bus services in Wales are subsidised through the Welsh Government's Bus Service Support Grant, a key funding mechanism administered via local authorities.



In evidence to the inquiry, the [Association of Transport Coordinating Officers \(ATCO\) Cymru](#) and [Stagecoach](#) hinted at a requirement for additional public investment in highways infrastructure measures to address congestion and promote bus priority on roads. They highlighted that combating congestion could boost operator profitability, thereby decreasing reliance on public funding to subsidise services. Conversely, if left unchecked, congestion could result in the need for increased public subsidy to maintain the commercial viability of certain services.

ATCO Cymru argued that effective implementation of existing policies to address congestion will require a 'significant amount of resources', particularly for highway infrastructure schemes. However, it believes that 'a strong business case' can be made under [Welsh transport planning and appraisal guidance](#) to justify the level of investment required.

ATCO also highlighted [existing legislation](#) that enables local authorities to establish Quality Partnership Schemes with local bus operators, arguing these have the potential to lever in private sector finances and thus maximise the benefit of public funding.

## UK funding

Congestion also contributes negatively to the wider socio-economic picture, with implications for economic growth. TAS drew attention to [prior research by Sir Rod Eddington](#), which examined the link between transport and the UK's economic productivity, growth and stability. TAS highlighted that economic efficiency could be improved through a reduction in 'wasted' time caused by congestion.

The UK Government has acknowledge congestion as an issue and, as part of the National Productivity Investment Fund announced in the [2016 Autumn Statement](#), outlined £2.6 billion to 'tackle congestion and ensure the UK's transport networks are fit for the future'. The statement makes clear that Barnett formula is applied so that decisions on how to spend allocations in devolved areas, such as transport, will rest with the Welsh Government.

## The solutions

The Welsh Government's [National Transport Finance Plan](#) contains a number of schemes to address the impact of congestion on Welsh bus services.



At present, local authorities in Wales are already encouraged to consider measures to reduce congestion by the [Planning Policy Wales](#) framework. Options include controlling car parking provision and giving consideration to use of powers to introduce road user charging and/or a workplace parking levy.

In his report, Professor Begg indicated that more cities need to implement congestion charges, parking levies and parking restraint measures. The implementation of the broad, existing policy measures was supported by TAS. They argued that local authorities are failing to exercise their traffic management responsibilities effectively, ‘inadvertently participating in the economic degeneration of the Welsh bus industry’. There were also calls for more provision of bus priority measures including the reallocation of road space.

Despite this, [ATCO Cymru highlighted](#) that changes should not be exclusively to highway infrastructure:

At a national level, tax and fiscal matters such as fuel duty can influence car ownership and use. At a regional and local level, Spatial Plans and Local Development Plans can ensure that new developments and facilities do not generate extra traffic by locating them along existing public transport routes.

While a spectrum of potential solutions are available, possibly the biggest challenge lies in delivering a shift away from private car use. ATCO Cymru stated that measures to disincentivise car travel in favour of the bus will be unpopular and require strong political will.

The Committee will hear further evidence from a range of witnesses during [its next meeting on 29 June 2017](#).

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Source: The Passenger Transport Intelligence Services bus summit presentation on [industry costs and sustainable business](#) (PDF, 5.2MB)

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