

Transport barriers to getting a job – Evidence from Citizens Advice clients

Executive Summary

This report examines the difficulties that lack of reliable and affordable transport provision can cause for those on low incomes who are looking for work, or trying to stay in work. It also examines the ways in which Jobcentre Plus recognises this in the way that its offices deal with people looking for work and claiming out of work benefits.

The evidence is based on clients who have approached Citizens Advice Bureaux for help and information.

From the evidence, five problems in particular are apparent:

- The location of job centres causes difficulties for those in rural areas, particularly when Jobcentre Plus offices insist on weekly or daily signing-on and when offices have closed permanently.
- Those living in rural areas without access to a car face particular difficulties in finding work due to poor transport provision and a lack of affordable social housing located nearer to employment opportunities. Those on low incomes may also be reluctant to move nearer to jobs due to their informal networks of support or family commitments in the area where they currently live
- Housing and jobs which are available to those on low incomes are often in locations that are more difficult to serve by public transport
- Weekend and evening services are being cut back due to funding cuts and this is making it very difficult for those working shifts outside the core nine to five Monday to Friday working week.
- Jobcentre Plus offices do not always recognise the difficulties that those reliant on public transport face and are imposing unreasonable sanctions on job seekers whose transport difficulties make it difficult for them to find work

The Department for Transport (DfT) and Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) need to work together to overcome the transport barriers that those looking for work can face.

Background

Since the 2010 Spending Review, public funding for bus services has been cut. There have been three main areas which have taken out funding available for bus services in England¹:

- Central government funding to local authorities for transport was cut by 28% which means that local authorities have cut back on funding to provide services which the commercial bus operators would not otherwise provide
- Bus service operators grant (BSOG), which goes directly to operators of local bus services, was cut by 20% from April 2012

¹ There have also been cuts in the other nations but this report draws on evidence from England

- Underfunding by central government of the statutory concessionary fares scheme by at least £60 million, which means that local authorities have made cuts elsewhere in order to fund it.²

The impact of these cuts in funding is that one in five council supported services has been cut as £36 million has been cut from funding for council supported services.³ Campaign for Better Transport has been running the Save Our Buses campaign to raise awareness of the value of buses and to try and protect bus services. As part of this, we have worked with Citizens Advice to gather information about the scale of bus cuts. This report looks at evidence from people attending Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB) with concerns about transport issues relating to employment. The report outlines the main areas of concern for those looking for work, which are set out below.

The selection of anonymised information on clients was provided by Citizens Advice to Campaign for Better Transport and represents a sample of cases from 2011.

Location of Jobcentre Plus offices

Jobcentre Plus offices are key for those looking for work in terms of accessing job opportunities, help and advice with finding work and as locations to sign-on to claim out of work benefits. However, the location of Jobcentre Plus offices can cause problems for those living in more rural areas.

Evidence from CAB clients shows that job seekers can spend a significant amount of their benefits on getting to the job centres – examples include £5.00, £6.00 and £7.20 round trips. Transport costs for people travelling to and from Jobcentre Plus offices to sign on are not reimbursed.

Closure of some Jobcentre Plus offices has made this worse as it has increased the distance needed to travel. Jobcentre Plus may also demand more trips at particular times – in one case a woman and her partner had to make five trips in one week to claim for employment and support allowance, apply for a crisis loan and attend other interviews, which cost them £38. Journeys to attend medical assessments may also add to the cost of transport.

Jobcentre Plus staff may also insist on some claimants signing on more frequently than once a fortnight, for example if they have no fixed abode or are suspected of fraud. One Jobcentre Plus office required weekly signings-on for 18-25 year olds, which meant a weekly 40 mile round trip for the claimant. Another couple were required to sign-on daily at a remote Jobcentre Plus office which cost them £13.10 each time.

Jobcentre Plus staff often do not recognise the difficulties faced by those living in rural areas – one adviser from a bureau wrote of the “seeming incomprehension of the Jobcentre to realise that asking / demanding / requiring client’s attendance at distant offices costs money from limited budgets anyway.”

Provision of transport in rural areas and difficulties in moving home

Those living in rural areas without access to a car face difficulties in finding work due to poor transport provision. People from rural areas complained of some villages having no bus service or only a weekday service, or of services not fitting in with working patterns (for instance the earliest bus for the nearest town leaving at 9.30 am).

² <http://www.bettertransport.org.uk/blogs/bus/What%E2%80%99s-the-use-of-a-bus-pass-with-no-bus-to-get-on>

³ <http://www.bettertransport.org.uk/media/13-oct-1-in-5-buses-cut>

It might be expected that people should move closer to employment opportunities. However, there is often a lack of affordable housing in rural towns close to job opportunities. In addition, those on low incomes or seeking work may be reluctant to move due to their informal networks of support in the area where they currently live or because of family commitments (for instance keeping children in their current school or access to children when couples separate).

Poorly located housing and employment opportunities for those on low incomes

There is also some evidence that those in low income communities looking for work may face specific problems over the location of their housing and the location of lower-skill jobs which those re-entering the labour market may need access to. One man had found work at a commercial estate and lived on an edge of town housing estate. He could not afford the high costs of owning a car and using it to get to work, but the locations and characteristics of his home and workplace meant that they were not well served by public transport networks (which tend to feed into town or city centre locations from areas of higher housing density in the surrounding area). This man had to give up his job because he could not afford the costs of driving and because there was no suitable public transport.

This echoes research by the Centre for Cities. It found that the geography of jobs is changing with higher skilled jobs increasingly concentrating in cities along the main transport corridors and in city centres and low-skilled jobs dispersing out of city centres.⁴ As we have suggested above, those on lower incomes are also more constrained in their ability to move than higher skilled workers.

Poor transport provision for those working outside nine to five

The way that bus services are provided in Great Britain outside London is a mixture of commercial services which bus operators decide to run (mainly on busier urban or part-urban routes and concentrated on peak-time and daytime services) and services which are funded by local authorities and which otherwise would not be provided. These local authority supported services tend to be those serving rural locations but also include weekend and evening services, often on the same routes that are provided in the daytime by commercial services.

With the cuts in local authority funding, evening and weekend services have often been the first to go rather than cuts to whole routes. Citizens Advice Bureau clients have been affected by these cuts. This has included people in work who have been told that they now need to work evenings, which would mean missing the last bus home – for example a woman who was faced with a choice of walking home alone at night or losing her employment

Jobcentre Plus staff do not always recognise that working early mornings, evenings or weekends may not be suitable for those reliant on public transport in areas where there are no bus services outside core hours. In one case, a man faced sanctions to his benefit for six months due to his inability to take a shift work job where the shift pattern involved starting or finishing at 10.00 pm and 6.00 am but where the first bus he could take was at 7.30 am and the last at 6.00 pm.

Jobcentre Plus understanding of transport problems and unfair sanctions

⁴ Moving on up, moving on out? Overcoming the jobs-skills mismatch

Author: Lena Tochtermann & Naomi Clayton

Date: 06/07/2011 http://www.centreforcities.org/assets/files/2011%20Research/11-07-04_City_Collaboration.pdf

One issue that comes out in all the areas discussed above is Jobcentre Plus staff understanding of the transport problems that job seekers face. Many bureau clients have faced sanctions by Jobcentre Plus offices for essentially “not trying hard enough” to find work. Payment of benefit can be stopped or reduced for a period for various reasons, including failing to apply for a vacancy notified by a Jobcentre Plus employment officer, or failure to take up a reasonable employment opportunity. Jobcentre Plus advisers are expected to take account of travelling time although claimants may have to be prepared to travel for up to an hour and a half in each direction. However, in many cases the problem appears to be the lack of any viable transport option.

Examples of cases seen by bureaux include:

- A man who faced moving to another employer through the TUPE process who was unable to get to the new employer as the location was inaccessible through public transport, and who faced sanctions for not taking up the offer of work
- A man was directed by the Jobcentre Plus office to a job that was inaccessible by public transport and to which, due to medical problems, he was unable to walk to. He took the details but did not follow up and he was sanctioned by Jobcentre Plus and his jobseekers’ allowance was stopped for 13 weeks
- A man was directed to a job in a rural area eight miles from where he lives. He told the Jobcentre Plus office that he did not drive nor own a car. His jobseekers’ allowance was sanctioned for 13 weeks for not taking up the offer of work on the basis that there was a bus service that he could have used. However, the bus service had to be booked the day before and the Jobcentre had not told him about the service before the sanction, nor helped him assess whether the demand responsive bus service would be suitable for someone working a long day

Conclusion

This report shows the difficulties that poor transport provision can cause for those looking for work. This can be exacerbated by the lack of understanding by Jobcentre Plus staff. The problems for people seeking work could get worse. The implementation of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 will mean the possibility of more severe sanctions for benefit claimants who fail to apply for a job, do not take up a job offer or who leave a job voluntarily. At the same time further cuts to public expenditure could further reduce availability of bus services so making it harder for people to take up or keep jobs. Whether in the current conditions of rising unemployment or in a situation where, as we hope, the economy starts to come out of recession, it is imperative that the transport system does not act as a barrier to employment.

Alongside this report, Campaign for Better Transport is publishing a literature review on transport and social exclusion (examining studies since the Social Exclusion Unit report on this in 2003) and an accompanying set of recommendations. There are six recommendations related to this area

- All agencies whose policies or decisions have a transport impact should show that the transport dimension has been taken into account. For example, benefits policy needs to take account of people’s transport difficulties. Where public services are being reorganised and relocated, access plans to show how those without cars will access these services should be mandatory and relocation/ reorganisation should not go ahead unless the access plans have been implemented.
- The DWP and DfT should guarantee to fund jointly with local authorities a roll-out of WorkWise schemes that help people overcome the transport barriers to securing and retaining employment.
- The DWP should review guidance to Jobcentre Plus offices on meeting the transport needs of job seekers

- The DfT should develop proposals for the reform of bus policy (including financial support from central and local government) which takes account of those on low incomes and include sufficient funding for concessionary fares schemes.
- The DfT should conduct research on the importance of bus services to disadvantaged groups and the impact on them of bus service cuts.
- The DfT should develop a package of measures to meet the needs of people in rural areas. This could include, for example: demand responsive public transport to connect with essential services or the wider public transport network; measures to improve access to services; support for local bus services; improved integration of rail and bus services; and the development of local walking and cycling networks

Campaign for Better Transport will be following up the evidence in this report in a workstream that is looking at how transport and access to jobs, services and amenities interacts with social exclusion and poverty. Transport professionals have focused on the role of transport in supporting economic development and, in recent years, how transport provision needs to change to safeguard the environment and cut carbon emissions. However, the role of transport policy in terms of delivering a fair and equitable society has been less developed.

In November 2012 the DfT intend to publish an Equalities Action Plan and in January 2013 to set out a new approach to local authority funding of bus services. These opportunities must be used to ensure that local transport authorities, bus operators and Jobcentre Plus work together to tackle the transport barriers to finding work.

We are grateful for the cooperation of Citizens Advice in producing this work, and for the support of UNISON in making it happen.

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Campaign for Better Transport

Campaign for Better Transport's vision is a country where communities have affordable transport that improves quality of life and protects the environment. Achieving our vision requires substantial changes to UK transport policy which we aim to achieve by providing well-researched, practical solutions that gain support from both decision-makers and the public.

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