



Future of Transport: rural strategy

Campaign for Better Transport submission to Department for Transport call for evidence

February 2021

About us

Campaign for Better Transport's vision is for all communities to have access to high quality, sustainable transport that meets their needs, improves quality of life and protects the environment. We are a charity and operate in England and Wales.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Department for Transport's Rural strategy. Below we set out our views on what central government and local authorities can do to support more sustainable transport options in rural areas. We also asked our supporter for their views on what the main challenges in rural areas are and for their ideas for possible solutions, so our response includes some quotes from supporters that have helped shape our submission.

The challenges facing rural areas

The consultation document rightly identifies car dependence, access to employment and key services and social isolation as the main challenges in rural areas.

There is a particular issue with bus services and in many rural areas, local authority supported buses have disappeared and commercial services have not taken their place. In rural areas, local authority-supported bus provision declined by 54 per cent between 2011/12-2019/20, while commercial services increased by only three per cent in the same period.¹ This has left communities poorly served or with no public transport provision.

Our 2020 report with CPRE found 56 per cent of small towns in the South West and North East of England have such bad transport connectivity that they are considered to be 'transport deserts' or are at imminent risk of becoming one.²

A report we are due to publish in March 2020 with the APPG for Left Behind Neighbourhoods also illustrates the challenges of accessing opportunities in more remote areas. We found 'left behind' communities have much lower car ownership levels (40 per cent of households have no access to a car, compared to the England average of 26 per cent). This means that in remote areas, not only are employment and services further away, but also they are not easily accessible by public transport. For example, 34 per cent of left behind neighbourhoods have longer travel times by public transport to a hospital than average, while 24 per cent of households are out of work and have no access to a car (double the England average).³

¹ Department for Transport (2020), Table BUS0207b: Vehicle kilometres on local bus services by urban-rural classification, and service type: England, annual from 2011/12

² <https://bettertransport.org.uk/nearly-one-million-people-stranded-transport-deserts>

³ Report due to be published in March 2020. Left Behind Neighbourhoods defined using a methodology developed by Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion, as outlined in <https://www.appg-leftbehindneighbourhoods.org.uk/publication/left-behind-understanding-communities-on-the-edge/>

Revitalising rural bus services

While bus use and bus provision has been declining across England for some time, the impact of the pandemic has been severe. The government messaging to avoid public transport has created a persistent fear of virus transmission on buses and trains in people's minds, despite much research now pointing that it is less dangerous than many other social settings.

This leads to a great deal of uncertainty about the speed and extent to which bus and rail use will recover. Recent analysis by Steer consultancy for the Urban Transport group found that the worst-case scenario for patronage for local transport as a whole was a loss of 35 per cent and the best case was a loss of 15 per cent. In addition, a recent RAC report found people are now much more likely to see access to a car as essential and their willingness to drive less if public transport was improved is at its lowest level for decades.⁴ There is a real danger that the pandemic will normalise travelling by car and new habits will be difficult to shift.

In the short to medium term this means that when the current restrictions begin to ease, government and operators will need to make a concerted effort to attract passengers back to public transport. In the longer term, government must reform the way that bus and rail services are funded, planned and delivered to ensure they meet people's needs in the most cost-efficient way.

Roles for government, sub-national bodies and local authorities

We believe local transport authorities are best placed to review local transport needs, plan for how these should be met and to work with operators and other partners to deliver these services. Local authorities should be given greater powers to plan transport provision locally and required to produce local integrated transport plans as a prerequisite for future funding.

Existing funding for local buses should be reformed and combined within a single long-term framework channelled through local authorities. Local authorities should be encouraged to form enhanced partnerships with operators, delivering a mixture of core commercial services and franchised supporting elements.

The new regime should incentivise local authorities to:

- Prioritise sustainable transport provision locally based on active travel, shared and public transport;
- Increase bus use through a combination of bus priority and affordability measures;
- Review local demand and deliver services in the most cost-efficient way, including demand responsive options where suitable.

“A couple of large empty buses going at inconvenient times to the wrong places does nothing to persuade people to manage without a car. Councils need more community engagement to find out when and where people need to go and look at different models. Maybe small electric rural shuttle buses connecting frequently to the main routes would be an option.”
A supporter in the Vale of Glamorgan

One of the biggest barriers, however, is gaps in authorities' capacity and capability to take on the negotiation and management of partnerships and management contracts for transport services, given the reduction in expertise and staffing. The government should provide support for local authorities to boost their capacity and capability and enable them to better identify local needs, to plan for how the gaps can best be plugged, apply for relevant funding and deliver solutions that best support their communities.

Demand responsive transport (DRT)

With changing demand due to the pandemic and pre-existing trends, fixed-route bus services will

⁴ <https://www.rac.co.uk/drive/features/car-dependency-and-the-pandemic/>

be increasingly less well suited to low-density rural areas. In such cases, DRT can provide both better services to passengers and efficiency savings for local authorities. While DRT bus services would still require some subsidy, replacing fixed-route local authority-supported bus services with flexible demand-responsive ones can create significant efficiency savings for local authorities.

There are many examples of areas where this model has worked successfully. For example, following the removal of a suite of unviable local authority-supported rural bus services, Tees Valley Combined Authority launched the “Tees Flex” on-demand bus service in February 2020, in partnership with Stagecoach and Via, to reconnect isolated rural communities. Operating in Darlington, Stockton, Hartlepool, and Redcar & Cleveland, it was expanded in September 2020 due to the popularity of the service among local residents. Milton Keynes Council is planning to shift all supported bus services to DRT, which is expected to generate savings of £1.5 million. Transport for Wales has also launched a nationwide DRT app called “fflecsi”, with different operators providing services in different regions through the app.

Total Transport

Because of the gap left by commercial bus services, in many rural areas there is a plethora of supplementary initiatives, such as volunteer-run community transport provision catering to specific community groups. In addition to consolidating local bus services, local authorities should take the lead in coordinating different types of provision, including commercial and subsidised bus services, community transport, as well as school, hospital and social care transport. Local authorities should work with different providers to avoid duplication and reach more users more efficiently.

Taking this a step further, the “Total Transport” approach involves pooling funding and resources from different providers into a service, which meets the collective needs of the wider community. Once commercial and local authority supported local bus routes are reviewed so as to serve the needs of as many users as possible, on-demand vehicles should be available to meet any remaining specialist needs, be they for school, hospital or social care appointments. This could be run as a social enterprise, with commercial or community providers commissioned to deliver the services, and any efficiency savings recycled back into transport services.

To make this work, number 10 and Cabinet Office should work with the Department for Transport and Department of Health and Social Care to combine transport budgets into a single local authority pot to commission local transport services that suit all local communities, including for non-urgent hospital appointments and social care. Any future trials should also be of sufficient geographical scope and length of time to allow a thorough assessment of the impacts.

Rail connectivity

Rail connectivity is much sparser in rural areas, which severely limits residents’ ability to reach more distant destinations. Our research into ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods found they lost half of all rail stations they used to have prior to the Beeching cuts. Investing in new rail capacity and connections, including reinstating passenger services on closed sections of the railway would help reconnect communities to economic and social opportunities. Yet, progress on restoring railway connectivity has been slow. The Department’s Acceleration Unit should examine how the process can be expedited.

Multimodal integration

To encourage greater use of a range of sustainable transport alternatives, local authorities should work alongside operators to develop integrated provision that encourages interchange between modes. Creating mobility hubs near existing major bus and rail termini, with provision for car and bike parking, car clubs and electric vehicle charging facilities would enable seamless interchange between modes.

“Rural transport mini-hubs with secure, free parking for cars and bikes, giving interchange with buses and trains.”
A supporter in Wisbech, Cambridgeshire

“Make existing cycling infrastructure accessible by surfacing it - my local cycle route is not a viable way to commute unless you like arriving at your destination soaking wet and covered in mud.”

A supporter in West Sussex

There is also significant potential to increase walking and cycling in rural areas, with the right infrastructure. In rural areas with narrower roads, separate pedestrian and cycle lanes and routes could be provided off-road. The new Active Travel England inspectorate should ensure schemes uphold the highest quality standards. Designs should also take into account different users’ needs, with widths, kerbs, crossings and parking spaces suited to a wide range of adapted and cargo bikes and e-bikes. As the consultation document rightly pointed out, e-bikes can enable people in rural communities to cycle for journeys

that may be too long or physically challenging for people. This is why we welcomed government plans to provide financial incentives towards the purchase of e-bikes.

Cleaner and shared vehicles

With car use more predominant in rural areas, facilitating a shift to zero-emission vehicles will play a large role in improving air quality and decarbonisation. This is why we welcomed the earlier phasing out petrol and diesel vehicles to 2030. It sets the direction and pace of change required for a greener future but we believe a target is also needed for completely removing the use of all fossil-fuelled cars and vans on the road.

Now the government must implement measures that increase the supply of zero emission vehicles and stimulate demand. On the supply side, the government should continue providing targeted grants for electric battery and hydrogen research and development. On the demand side, the government can provide incentives for businesses, car hire and car sharing schemes to renew their fleets, while the second-hand market develops. The main barrier for consumers and businesses switching to electric vehicles is still charging infrastructure, so a wider and faster roll-out is also required.

“More electric car charging points to encourage cleaner energy cars. Perhaps more car clubs in villages – my parents’ village has one. And legalise electric scooters: I know they more suit small journeys in urban areas but they could be used in rural areas too.”

A supporter in Steyning, West Sussex

Alongside cleaner vehicles, shared car use, such as car clubs and peer-to-peer sharing platforms, can also make a big difference for reducing overall vehicle miles, particularly among existing car owners. There is good evidence that car sharing enables people to give up their personal vehicles and reduce the overall mileage they drive.⁵ Facilitating car club operations locally would enable people to dispose of, or not purchase, a private car, knowing that the option exists for residual journeys, which cannot easily be made by walking, cycling or public transport.

Once the pandemic eases, the need to connect rural communities in a way that is greener and fairer will be more urgent than ever, so this strategy should ensure rural transport has a brighter future.

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⁵ <https://como.org.uk/shared-mobility/shared-cars/why/>