Transport, accessibility and social exclusion

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Transport, accessibility and social exclusion: how poor transport provision affects those on low incomes

Introduction

In the past few years, much attention has been given to the role of the transport system in economic growth and the impact of transport on the environment, particularly on carbon emissions. However, less has been given to the role of the transport system (including how people can access jobs, services and amenities) in enabling social inclusion and helping those on low incomes.

The current emphasis on increasing spending on transport infrastructure while cuts are made to support for transport services could mean that those on low incomes are shut out of opportunities and trapped in poverty. Less emphasis on ensuring accessibility through the planning system and closure of local services to save costs could exacerbate this.

The House of Commons’ Environmental Audit Committee has announced a new inquiry on transport and the accessibility of public services. This is a welcome move to address the imbalance in debates on transport. Campaign for Better Transport’s contribution to this debate is the publication of three pieces of research:

- A literature review of transport and poverty
- Evidence on transport barriers to getting a job
- Case studies of the social inclusion value of buses

This paper summarises the research and sets out some headline recommendations.

Transport and poverty

In 2003, the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) published a major report into transport and social exclusion, which recommended a new approach on accessibility planning. In a review of the main literature published since the SEU report, we concluded that:

- Improving transport services and making them affordable and accessible addresses social exclusion. Use of an accessibility planning approach by local authorities, as recommended by the SEU, is mixed and the Department for Transport is unclear on its attitude to accessibility planning
- Those on low incomes are more reliant on bus services with half of the poorest fifth of the population not having a car, rising to more than two thirds of job seekers. Those on low incomes may also be less able to take advantage of cheaper bus or train fare deals which involve paying sums up front
- Transport poverty needs to be defined carefully, especially in relation to car ownership, and focused on real deprivation. If it is simply defined as, say, spending more than 10 per cent on motoring and other transport costs, it would mean that those in the highest income brackets would be most in poverty
- Low income communities tend to have higher exposure to the negative impacts of transport, facing greater risk of being killed or seriously injured on the roads, higher levels of air pollution leading to greater risk of premature death, and also lower levels of social interaction due to higher traffic levels affecting the level of contact between neighbours and others in the community

Transport barriers to getting a job

Campaign for Better Transport has been working with Citizens Advice to look at the impact of bus cuts and poor transport on those who come to Citizens Advice Bureau for help. From this evidence,
it is clear that job seekers face a number of significant difficulties. These include:

- Cuts to Job Centres in less built up areas, which can mean some spending a significant share of their benefits travelling long distances to sign on (particularly where Job Centres insist on weekly or even daily signing on)
- 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 near employment opportunities. They 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
- The location of housing and jobs which are available to those on low incomes is often in locations that are more difficult to serve by public transport, with many lower skill entry level jobs located away from town or city centres and with cuts to buses serving more isolated estates
- Weekend and evening services are being cut back and this is making it very difficult for those working shifts outside the core nine to five Monday to Friday working week
- Many Job Centres do not recognise the difficulties that those reliant on public transport face and are imposing unreasonable sanctions on job seekers whose lack of transport options make it difficult for them to find work

The research shows the importance of bus services to many people. Since the cuts to services, those living in the area are less able to get to local shops or employment. Buses are also very important to many people’s social lives. A number of those affected mentioned no longer being able to go the pub to meet friends. Although this might appear as less important than the impact in other areas, it affects people’s network of friends and support. There is also a wealth of evidence that social isolation (and lower rates of social capital) result in worse outcomes in many areas, including health, employment and income.

In Burbank, the council has laid on a free once a week replacement bus but this does not provide the regular frequent service that would enable people to make independent choices about travel. For both locations, taxis were expensive, and walking was not an option for many with poor walking routes, few shops or facilities nearby and poor health among some of those previously using the bus services.

Fundamentally, what the case study research shows is that cutting bus services results in people leading less independent lives. This loss of independence means they are less able to “get on” rather than just “get by”. There is a danger of trapping people in welfare dependency and isolation instead of addressing the transport aspects of social exclusion. As one of the respondents said about the impact of cuts to bus services, “I think you just kind of give up . . .”

**Case studies on transport and social inclusion**

Campaign for Better Transport commissioned Ecorys, an independent research company, to undertake research in two urban edge locations to examine how cuts in bus services were affecting social inclusion. The two locations were the Burbank Estate in Hartlepool (where all regular buses had been cut) and the Marchwood area near Southampton (where evening and weekend services had been cut).
Recommendations

Our research shows that transport and the accessibility of employment, shops and services cause significant problems for those on low incomes. Cuts to bus services, rising public transport fares and the closure of local services are all exacerbating the situation. The Government has an opportunity to address this as they develop a national strategy for transport (due in Autumn 2012), an equalities action plan which will address well-being and fairness (due in November 2012) and a new approach to supporting local bus services (due in January 2013).

But there is a need for government as a whole to address this. Our top priorities for action across government are:

- The DfT should convene a summit with Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Communities and Local Government, Local Government Association, passenger transport executives and public transport operators to address how to overcome the transport barriers to those looking for work, drawing on the good practice that has already been developed
- 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 Department for Transport (DfT) and Department for Communities and Local Government should promote effective accessibility planning as part of local plans and local transport plans

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References

2. Available at http://www.bettertransport.org.uk/campaigns/research