
July-Sept 2013

Parliamentary Transport Committee inquiry

Transport in isolated communities



Bus Users

Working for passengers

Bus Users UK's response

How do Government and local authorities identify demand for passenger transport in isolated communities (including rural and urban areas and island communities)?

We are not aware of how this is done currently. However needs should be identified by inviting comments and suggestions from all potential stakeholders: local community representatives, interested individuals, people with particular vulnerabilities or additional needs, schools (staff, students and parents), local employers and employees, healthcare providers, high street shops and market traders.

Discussion with local transport providers, or those who may be interested in providing services, at an early stage is vital: assumptions as to how the potential demand could be met may be different from the reality, and often good dialogue with transport providers can produce unexpected solutions, such as having scope to divert an existing service, creating a low-cost solution. Where they exist, transport user panels or groups should also be consulted.

Where funds exist local surveys/surgeries should be used to garner responses to proposals and extensive advertising in local press, social media and radio should be undertaken to ensure a broad reach to all sections of the community to be served. A surgery approach can often engage people who wouldn't bother to attend a public meeting or respond in other ways, though at the risk of stating the obvious, such events need to be right in the locality, to enable people to get to them, and not at a nearby town to which the lack of access may be the problem.

To what extent are the needs of different groups of passengers (e.g. people with disabilities, older people, young people) taken into account in determining the provision of public transport to isolated communities?

Often the most vulnerable seem to be the least regarded when planning public transport, with the varying lifestyles of young, middle-aged and elderly people seemingly not taken into account, especially if they have additional needs that make them dependent on public transport. As decision makers often have access to cars, the extent of isolation for people who are wholly dependent on public transport is often under-estimated

Many services in isolated areas only run every few hours and stop too early for users to enjoy an evening out at a restaurant, cinema and all the other amenities that rely on their trade, without having to factor in the cost of a taxi at the end of an evening, which can make the outing unaffordable.

People who need to attend regular medical appointments may have to leave hours in advance of their appointment to be able to arrive on time and wait another lengthy period before being able to return, wasting a whole day for the sake of a 20 minute appointment. Young people need their independence and don't want to be asking a parent to collect them, even assuming the family has access to a car. The restricted transport options stop young people getting Saturday jobs or attending education and training courses.

People of all ages who work or want to work often find they cannot arrive at (and get home from) a job on offer, with any kind of reliability, further squeezing the local economy and frustrating local would-be employers. It is not unusual for services to isolated (and indeed often, not-so-isolated) communities to

finish at around 17.00, making it impossible for people to use public transport to access jobs. Often those jobs with less social hours are at the lower end of the wage scale, making it impossible for people to get a first foot on the employment ladder. Services covering much more than the 'traditional' working day are thus essential to overcome isolation and to maximise opportunity for people in isolated communities. Quality of life can be seriously affected for good or ill, by the provision/withdrawal of services, especially on public holidays and Sundays, as these can be the only means of visiting family and friends at those times. Some operators have risen to the public holiday challenge but many more need to follow suit

If this were not enough, as more and more public services (eg health services, education, Job Centres, local authority services) are centralised, isolated communities become ever more disenfranchised if the cost and timing of transport services make journeys to town halls, borough councils, hospitals, leisure facilities etc impossible. Some of the savings made from centralising public services should be made available for transport to ensure that people from more isolated communities can access them. The benefits should also be quantified (eg savings to the health service from people being able to access facilities such as swimming pools, or even from simply enjoying an improved quality of life) and factored in to any economic assessment of the value of public transport services.

What are the main challenges associated with providing better and more consistent bus and rail services to isolated communities? How can these challenges be overcome?

It can be difficult to make a going concern out of many rural and isolated routes but there are many transport personnel willing to work creatively with local authorities to resolve these problems. If local authority transport planners across the UK got together with operators in rural areas around the UK to discuss possible solutions, based on the needs expressed by their constituents, taking inspiration from areas where new ideas are being trialled, they may find that they can use their local autonomy and budgets to work with their local population to find a new way forward that will satisfy more of the people they serve, possibly with little of any extra investment over time.

Often imaginative solutions have to be reached that do not conform to the classic model of tendering bus services under the 1985 Transport Act. For instance a network-wide approach, whereby a bus company operates a whole network including some objectives stipulated by and paid for at the margins by the local authority can provide communities with a bus service much more effectively and at lower cost than can be achieved by putting individual routes out to tender. De minimis funding can also enable existing services to be 'tweaked' to create new links in a more effective way than competitive tendering. Such methods need to be fully enabled by the legislative framework.

How effectively do Community Transport services address the needs of passengers in isolated communities? How could Community Transport be improved?

Where CT services are properly resourced and managed, they can provide an excellent, cost-effective adjunct to standard public transport solutions. This is especially so where they are tailored carefully to provide effective connection with the existing bus network, so that the main service network actually benefits from working in conjunction with CT rather than being threatened by it. Often CT schemes are under-resourced and such services rely too heavily on a few core volunteers. With injections of small amounts of cash, good marketing and cooperation with local bus operators, passenger (or potential passenger) numbers could be built up and CT could lose its reputation as something just to be grateful for and become an integral part of the public transport patchwork, even making a very positive contribution to what is there already.

To what extent should passengers in isolated communities be expected to rely on taxis and other demand-responsive transport services?

They shouldn't. It's divisive and leads inevitably to social isolation for people without access to large-scale funding. Around a third of UK residents have no driver's licence and they should not be penalised for this. Taxi fares in rural and isolated areas can be exorbitant, even when the company is not taking advantage of people with no option. All citizens should have access to a reasonable public transport option, developed in consultation with local residents.

Demand responsive services have seldom proved successful in the long-term, can be expensive to provide and can be confusing to users. They also stifle spontaneity through requirements to be booked in advance; bus services should be accessible when people need them and should not require advance booking.

What are the main challenges associated with funding transport services in isolated communities? How can these services be made more affordable?

Trial and error will always be a part of trying to run viable services but consultation and engagement with those who want such services will help to expand the "ownership" of the service that is provided. Local community transport "deals" where local community groups or transport user groups work with the operator/Local Authority to devise a minimum usage requirement, understanding that when passenger numbers fall below targets for an agreed period, services could be restricted. A partnership approach would enable many services to be adapted to the rise and fall in demand, for some non-commercial services to be retained in agreement with the Local Authority concerned and for residents to accept the reduction or withdrawal of services which do not attract as many passengers as hoped.

Some changes to the concessionary fare scheme could be made to enable concessionary cardholding passengers who are the main or only users of a service, rendering the route non-viable, to contribute a voluntary fare of their own choosing, to support the service and ensure its continuation. This would currently be against the law, but we believe there should be some leeway here if passengers are asking for this. (We have seen examples of this being suggested and operators having to refuse.)

Young people should be given a reduced fare not just up to the age of 18 and then see a huge rise in the fares, which turns them away from public transport. We would suggest that graduating fare increases up to the age of 25 would encourage many more young people to stick with travelling by public transport and avoid the enormous costs of getting into car ownership at a young age. This would increase the numbers of young people using public transport throughout the day and evening and the increased volume, albeit at a lower rate, should make many services more viable.

Attention should also be given to ensuring best value for money is obtained from the main bus network, with good coordination of services enabling the best coverage for the lowest cost. All too often we see two services along common sections of route running within minutes of each other rather than being properly spaced to maximise their usefulness (even where services are supported by the local authority), and thorough network reviews to eliminate such situation could free up resource to create links that don't currently exist.

Claire Walters, Chief Executive
Stephen Morris, Deputy Chief Executive
2 September 2013