



LACKING LINKS

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A
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Briefing Paper
Authored by Elizabeth Anderson



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The case for increased investment in rural transport

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Introduction

Within London, workers and residents have a range of transport options – keeping people moving around the capital with relative ease. But moving outside those areas, transport options narrow, and become much less regular. This paper takes a look at the issues facing residents living in some of less well connected areas – comparing them with London expectations, and makes recommendations for improving facilities for this group – giving them stronger access to towns and cities, where they can access employment, training and leisure opportunities. It is largely compiled based on open conversations with those living in rural areas across the country, using anecdotal evidence to demonstrate the challenges facing those outside cities, on a topic where quantitative data is limited.

The reality of rural transport

Those living in country regions have a range of transportation issues to consider. Vast areas – including large numbers of towns and villages – have no rail links within a practical walking distance, thereby meaning that bus travel is essential. In London, services in residential areas will often run every 10-12 minutes, leading to five or six buses an hour. These types of services are replicated in cities and larger towns across the country.

In country areas such bus services can be much less frequent – even though people still have places to go – buses may be between every one to two hours. As well as limiting options, services often only run for limited core hours – meaning strikingly early commutes, and removing the ability of families to stay out late for standard activities such as visiting the cinema or gym. A country dweller highlighted to me her

experience of a bus sailing straight past her at night, leaving a single woman on a dark road until the next bus some two hours later.

Tracking facilities are much more limited too. Whilst in London, the Countdown service introduced in 2011 is now commonplace, the benefits that were foreseen didn't reach lost villages. Bus stops in country areas very rarely have display boards, and in some areas it is often noted that services do not run to timetables, making it very difficult for workers, parents and shoppers to know whether or not they have missed their service – which may have gone early or be severely delayed. In the rare areas where these can be found – for example at Bluewater shopping centre – they may display the time a bus is due, rather than the time it is actually expected. And anecdotally it is found that buses either do not use trackers – meaning that the information on the boards or on the apps may not be accurate because there is no way to link to it. Speaking to one Kentish resident, he said, *“everyone knows you don't take the bus if you have somewhere you need to be at a specific time.”*

Worse still, during road maintenance, whole villages may be left off the network. A recent example in Kent left nearly 2 miles of its route uncatered for, prompting considerable local dissatisfaction reported in local press¹. Local residents had no means of travelling outside their villages without access to a car, including a disabled woman unable to access medical treatment.

Fares are also considerably higher outside the capital. Where an Oyster fare is £1.50, capped at £4.50 for a day², tickets outside the capital can cost huge sums, depending on how far is being travelled and whether you are crossing local authority boundaries. For example, one local resident explained that to travel by bus from the village of Eccles in Kent to the town of Rochester (also in Kent, but within the unitary authority of Medway), costs an adult £7.80 – to go only five miles. A similar journey of seven

¹ https://www.kentonline.co.uk/malling/news/how-do-we-get-to-village-hotel-ask-bus-passengers-203296/?fbclid=IwAR2KOnUdqW9MkukxFXFYC4mTV67zm9iVW581A5MHhXOTgGLj_dMYqp4o7OM

² <https://www.visitlondon.com/traveller-information/getting-around-london/london-bus>

miles from Northfleet to Dartford costs the same³, despite being linked on the rail network and costing only £4.20 for a single journey by train - which is substantially quicker, because it crosses between Gravesham and Dartford. And for those travelling with a child, family fares do not benefit smaller or single parent families, who might often be at the bigger risk of poverty and therefore may not have access to a car, and may have the greatest need to access employment opportunities.

The sums involved disadvantage residents in such smaller villages, who may need to take more than one bus to get where they need to go, even before considering the cost of rail travel. And train services serving smaller villages are often infrequent. In London, many are used to the tube – with a long wait being more than five minutes. In outer London, trains to London running only two to four times an hour are considered frustrating. But an hourly service is not unusual. Villages on the north Kent line will often see such a service, with villages such as Teynham⁴ in Kent only having an hourly service outside rush hour. But for really poor connections, one only has to look to north Wales. Busy towns, such as Blaenau Ffestiniog, home of a major slate mining community, has a service roughly every three hours to Llandudno throughout the day.

Not only this, but the lack of integrated transport across the country, means that trains and buses are rarely timetabled to connect. In countries such as Germany and Switzerland⁵, transport providers provide thought through timetabling which ensures those using more than one type of transport see a clear journey which links up – whether by bus, rail or even boat. In English rural areas, trying to link a journey may be nearly impossible.

³ <https://tickets.arrivabus.co.uk/kent-and-surrey/kent-and-medway/>

⁴ www.nationalrail.co.uk

⁵ <https://www.sbb.ch>

The north is similarly badly off. The Lake District, a paradise for tourism – with Cumbria’s tourist trade worth £2.9m⁶, has very limited transport opportunities. Served by the West Coast Mainline and the Cumbria Coast Line (the latter using old rolling stock, considered by locals as a link to Sellafield), bus services are poor to non-existent. Smaller villages may see absolutely no bus service whatsoever (such as Ennerdale, in the Copeland district), meaning that residents who don’t drive are reliant on either taxis or lifts – especially damaging for those who are elderly. For those on low incomes, this can harshly restrict their ability to access services. And for those seeking work, it may be financially unviable to do so.

It seems the country is made for people with cars, at a time when as a country we are targeting net zero carbon emissions.

How do we improve?

Greater connections are absolutely essential to ensuring that residents in rural areas are able to access the types of services that residents in city centres take for granted. But a number of changes are needed to make this a reality.

Short to medium term

There are simple changes which would transform the way that transport works. Providing computerised information boards sharing bus running information at each stop (across all providers, where there are more than one), would be of huge benefit in ensuring that people could make informed decisions about their transport and route planning. To make this work, it is essential that buses are fitted with trackers

⁶ <https://www.cumbriatourism.org/cumbrias-tourism-economy-now-worth-2-9billion/>

and that drivers are mandated to ensure that these are working and report any difficulties with them.

Increasing the frequency of buses is another key issue. Whilst bus companies must ensure sustainability of routes, the entire transport system in some areas has led to people basing their lives on no access to public transport. A poor service discourages use, and provides a cycle of disincentive to improve that service. Setting high standards, with frequent routes, could revolutionise country living. Communities have a genuine desire for integrated transport opportunities, which can take them into larger towns. By providing such a way for people to travel, deprivation can be tackled. Boarding a bus should be an easy way to reach interviews, jobs, career development – rather than expecting people to make do.

And looking again at routes is also vital. This country is speckled with not just towns and cities, but tiny villages that need public transport at an affordable price. With an aging population and a changing demographic of a typical family, more than ever before people need the infrastructure that will enable them to reach other areas. More networks are essential, not less. Whilst the old hub and spoke model has served areas – including London – very well for decades, the world is changing, and people need to be able to criss cross the country in different ways. Whereas in London going into the centre to come out again is an irritation, it is highly achievable through frequent trains, buses and tubes. With a bus service that only runs every couple of hours, that's a lot more of a challenge.

Fares are unsustainable for many. High prices simply discourage people from leaving their own immediate environment, which is bad for individuals and bad for business, and prevents people from making the connections they need.

And overall, there should be greater opportunity and reduced regulation to allow smaller businesses to consider running community routes at lower cost. Whilst safety is paramount, communities often know what they need, and may be able to achieve more with less cost, and with greater flexibility. Community transport exists already,

but on a strict not-for-profit basis⁷ , but could provide the opportunity for small enterprises in local areas leading to new paid openings for local people.

Medium to long term

In the longer term, our whole transport infrastructure across the whole country needs revisited. Integrated public transport is essential. Trains and buses need to link up – rather than having long waits between connections, transport bosses need to recognise that in today’s fast paced society, a half hour wait for a bus from a train that only arrives at a station every half an hour, is not helpful.

Looking further into the future, more links are needed more frequently, and different types of transport need to be considered. In some towns such as Manchester and Croydon, trams have revolutionised how people move around, and are efficient, clean and popular. Buses can only achieve so much – they are subject to the irregularities of traffic congestion and can seat limited passengers. There is no reason why such new modes of transport couldn’t operate in country areas, with regular stops and providing a modern service fit for the 21st century, supporting many areas affected by the Beeching cuts.

A strategic view, which mixes local need with national drive, is essential to ensure that we give people the services that they need. As we enter the third decade of the 21st century, it is simply not reasonable to expect people to rely on private cars. For those who are too young to drive, those on low incomes, or those with medical conditions, it is simple impossible. And for everyone, it is a mighty restriction to place on those who choose not to drive for any reason.

⁷ <https://ctauk.org/about-cta/what-is-community-transport/>

Conclusion and recommendations

Successive governments have talked about the necessity of improving rural communities' lives and access to services. High speed broadband has become a go to policy in recent years, and undoubtedly can provide a huge boost. However, moving people from one place to another is one of the most basic aspects of improving the economy. From gaining money through jobs to spending money in shops, people need to get from A to B to keep the economy moving.

This paper calls on central and local government, together with transport providers and local communities, to think about the changes that would make their lives better. To this end we recommend:

1. A national, industry led initiative to ensure all buses can be tracked – meaning every bus has a tracking device; information boards are in place at the majority of bus stops; and live running information from all bus companies released as open source data to allow app developers to provide smartphone apps and textback services for the whole country in one place.
2. Routes and fares looked at with a completely fresh eye, with a range of public engagement options to find out where people want to go and how; flexible pricing based on distance and common destinations; resident discounts; and preventing whole villages being completely off the public transport map.
3. More work to incentivise new transport options – from small enterprises starting whole new routes, through to more modern services such as trams, opening the market place and giving local community leaders the chance to shape transport services.



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