

Transport Select Committee Inquiry: Passenger Transport in Isolated Communities

Submission by ACRE (August 2013)

ACRE is the national charity supporting rural community action through its founder members, the Rural Community Councils (RCCs) across England. The 38 RCCs are independent local development agencies, based at county level, addressing social, economic and environmental challenges in rural areas. They provide help, support and advice for community-led action in rural areas throughout England.

Summary

- Community transport has always had a critical role to play in enabling access to services and reducing isolation. The sector's growth needs to be encouraged and supported so that it can help fill the gaps in delivery and provide sustainable and targeted services. ACRE's member organisations are actively involved with rural transport issues at local regional and national level and in some cases operate community transport services. Four of our member organisations have submitted responses independently and we endorse their submissions. They are:
 - Tees Valley Rural Community Council
 - Rural Community Council of Essex
 - Oxfordshire Rural Community Council
 - Community First Wiltshire
- Passenger transport is a fundamental challenge especially for isolated rural communities particularly for people without access to private transport. Public transport withdrawal during this period of austerity has left many rural residents, who lack access to private transport, in very difficult circumstances.
- There are many questions this inquiry raises including what constitutes an isolated community. We would argue that isolation is not merely a function of geographical remoteness but includes a range of other factors including social and economic exclusion and the availability of local public transport. We would also state that it is not only the most remote rural communities that are becoming increasingly isolated because of cuts to public (mainly bus) transport.
- The challenge for many people living in rural areas especially for those who are more isolated or deprived, is to obtain the services they need within the constraints of their personal transport options be they private, public or community.

- Transport in isolated rural areas is inextricably linked with most other issues affecting communities living there. The availability of services and jobs in towns and cities is worthless without access to appropriate forms of transport to the right place at the right time. It cannot be assumed that rural residents have access to their own private transport.

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

- 1.1 Many of our members have carried out local transport surveys showing current demand and gaps in provision. These have included local authority commissioned work and surveys via Parish Councils and as part of Community Led Planning activity.
- 1.2 Surveys are usually undertaken where there is a need to identify gaps due to cuts in bus services and, the need for a local authority to undertake smarter transport planning in times of austerity. The surveys are effective as they identify possible solutions as well as ways to save money. They often point towards the provision of bespoke and community led and localised services.
- 1.3 RCAN members across the country work with Rural Transport Partnerships, where they exist, and where they don't; they take on the challenge of working with other stakeholders to maintain the focus on rural transport needs and solutions. For example, North Yorkshire County Council brings together community and in house transport providers to look at how they are working together.
- 1.4 Traditional bus services are not appropriate to serve isolated communities both from a geographical point of view (e.g., narrow lanes), because they are ecologically unsound and economically they just don't work.
- 1.5 We would advocate for a range of solutions to suit a community's specific needs – community transport, taxi buses, small buses and post buses.

To conclude there should be a more systematic surveying of communities which would raise the issue of community transport as many communities seem confused about what community transport is and where they can access it.

2. 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?

It appears that very little account is taken of the needs of people with disabilities, older people and younger people. Though provision in some areas aims to cater for older people. The main challenges are:

- Provision of fully accessible vehicles.
- Isolated communities are often accessible only by narrow unlit lanes and the distance to bus stops and pick up points creates problems for the elderly and young people.
- After school transport is rarely available restricting the ability to take part in extracurricular activities. Evening and weekend transport in isolated areas further restricts access to activities for young people.

In an effort to shape service decisions Essex County Council use 'Accession' accessibility mapping software to identify the ability of people with different needs to access key services.

3. 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?

- 3.1 Costs and charging structures in low demand/high mileage areas – isolated areas by their nature means longer distances and higher costs (particularly fuel costs), which the provider would seek to pass on partially or fully to the passenger. Fares need to be affordable while at the same time prices charged, sustainable for the provider.

East Cleveland Minibus Brokerage provides an example of what can be achieved to help cut costs and achieve a more sustainable service. Tees Valley RCC's response provides details.

- 3.2 An acceptance that certain essential services will never provide an economic return and have to be subsidised in some form. The Government and the community transport sector must work together with all parties to get a best possible alternative.
- 3.3 Providing transport services at times people need them e.g. the scenario of catching a bus on Tuesday that does not return until Friday does not work for the average passenger. Better connectivity between all parties including supermarkets and retailers offering bus services, between bus and rail services and between operators could link up their service provision to help address this issue.
- 3.4 Provision of services in times of winter/bad weather – especially in high altitude areas needs consideration.
- 3.5 Better communication of the services that are available and an understanding that older people may not have access to the internet and efficient broadband is not readily available in some rural areas. If people don't know about services they cannot use them; unused transport is not viable.
- 3.6 Incentives for families and car users to change their mode of transport may increase use of services that are available making them more viable.

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

- 4.1 Our Network and local transport providers have worked in partnership for many years to develop tried and tested solutions for individual communities, including demand responsive buses, community mini-buses, car-based taxis, good neighbour schemes and even community rail partnerships. This includes work with isolated communities. Essex County Council supports 12 community transport schemes across Essex run as charitable organisations. The quality of service is a success due to it being personalised, flexible and reliable.
- 4.2 The most recent CTA State of the Sector Report showed the community transport sector is increasing but that some organisations were struggling

financially. We believe that it will always need a degree of subsidy and/or grant funding to make a significant difference on rural routes.

4.3 In terms of improvement there is positive trend towards the development of CT infrastructure/umbrella bodies at a more local level e.g. Buckinghamshire Community Transport Hub and Suffolk Community Transport. Their roles include help with publicity, co-ordinate demand (one stop shop approach) provide business support services for their members.

4.4 Suggested improvements:

- Better communication and partnerships between organizations providing transport services.
- Easing of current driver (D1) legislations to benefit recruitment and retention of volunteer drivers.
- A willingness by local authorities to support and utilize community transport.
- Wider communication and promotion about availability of community transport alongside public transport taking into account appropriate methods of communication for different users.

Background from Community Action Surrey who have supported voluntary car schemes for over 20 years

"In Surrey voluntary car schemes/good neighbour schemes have existed for almost 50 years and Surrey CA has supported these for over 20 years.

We have about 100 such schemes offering transport to anyone in their communities but it is almost all elderly people who use the service. The schemes vary in size from 10 volunteers to 150 volunteers, doing as few as 120 passenger journeys to 15,000 passenger journeys a year. Last year we did a short survey of the schemes and we had a 79% return rate. The 79% reported that they did 82,500 passenger journeys for 7,300 clients. Our estimate is that approximately 75% would have been health related journeys. Of all the requests only 0.7% were turned down and that was usually because too short notice was given.

These voluntary schemes work very well in the communities that have them. The Voluntary Car Schemes Adviser is continually trying to develop new schemes. In the past 21 years Surrey Community Action has assisted 43 schemes to develop. There are another three in the pipeline and another two possible new schemes. On the evidence to date, it would seem that until every community/village/town has such a scheme, this development work will continue as there does appear to be a need for the schemes across the county, both in urban and rural areas.

Clients find these schemes to be a lifeline for them. The schemes provide transport to hospital appointments before hospital transport even begins work. They will go across borders and the drivers wait for their clients, often staying with them in the hospital"

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

- 5.1** Taxis are cost prohibitive for many people in isolated areas, concessionary passes cannot be used in taxis and there can be a limited supply. However they could be used as part of the transport mix in isolated communities. They could provide a failsafe option as part of a car sharing scheme? Community First Wiltshire suggest a web based portal for taxi operators to use to advertise 'dead' journeys may be useful in advertising journey opportunities and in bringing down costs for passengers.
- 5.2** For young people relying on parents for financial support taxi costs can be prohibitive and put financial pressure on struggling families.

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

In addition to information already supplied:

- There is no incentive for people to use public transport. Invest money in better transport solutions and incentives for people to leave their cars at home.
- Costs for families could be grouped, for example transport to post 16 education for parents with more than one teenager going onto school/college outside of their village could be offered a group ticket.
- Improve operator viability by making meaningful frequency and regularity of provision. Reliable and trustworthy services are needed.
- Maximize technology for current needs and co-ordinate services to get provision to the right place and right time.
- Allow public transport to run on cheaper fuels such as red diesel or invest in more energy efficient technologies.
- Set up a driver/vehicle bank so people know what is being used and what is available to use.
- Develop multi-use vehicles which deliver milk, post, parcels and people!

If you have any further queries or require clarification do not hesitate to contact Martin Hawkins (m.hawkins@acre.org.uk)