

Evidence to the House of Commons Transport Committee Passenger Transport in Isolated Communities

1. Introduction

1.1 Passenger Focus is the statutory watchdog for bus passengers in England (outside London) and for rail passengers in Great Britain. .

2. Rural bus

2.1 The provision of bus services in rural areas has been identified as a matter of concern in various reports – for example:

- The Commission for Rural Communities published a report into social isolation experienced by older people in rural communities¹. It highlighted a greater dependence on car use, largely because there is less public transport than in urban areas.
- Research² published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2010 found that ‘transport costs make up the single largest element of additional costs’ of living in rural areas.

2.2 We would like to draw the Committee’s attention to Passenger Focus’s own research in this area.

Rural Bus services³

2.3 Passenger Focus asked passengers for their views on Herefordshire Council’s ‘market day bus’ tendered services and Shropshire Council’s ShropshireLink. The market day buses were conventional tendered bus services which carried passengers from very rural locations into their local towns, nearly all once a week, bringing them back a few hours later. ShropshireLink was a demand-responsive transport, generally available twice a week (sometimes more frequently), with registered users having to book ahead; a significant number of passengers are picked up from their home.

2.4 The key findings highlight the importance of these local bus services and the lack of alternatives:

- For just over half of the passengers, these services account for ‘all’ or ‘most’ of the trips they make outside their neighbourhood.
- For around a third of passengers, making trips by private means would be very inconvenient. Specifically for the trip they had just made, around half said

¹[Social isolation experienced by older people in rural communities](#). September 2012

²[A minimum income standard for rural areas](#). Smith, Davies and Hirsch. November 2010

³[Rural bus services](#). Passenger Focus. September 2011

that if the market day bus or ShropshireLink had not been available they “would have been unable to make that trip”.

- The majority of passengers are aged over 60, with a good proportion aged over 70. Around a third said they had a disability, which is not dissimilar to the overall proportion in the Bus Passenger Survey⁴.
- The vast majority of passengers were very satisfied with all aspects of the journey they had just made (at the bus stop, punctuality, on bus comfort, the bus driver).
- Passengers rated very highly the way the service is provided overall (bus route, journey times and specifically for the ShropshireLink the registration process and time slots offered for pickup).

Bus service reductions – the impact on passengers⁵.

2.5 The Comprehensive Spending Review reduced the budgets available for local councils and as a consequence also for local transport authorities. To meet the budgetary challenges, some publicly-supported bus services (i.e. those not operated on a full commercial basis), have been removed, reduced, or the network altered.

2.6 Passenger Focus wanted a better sense of the impact of such decisions on passengers. We found there were four main types of impact on people’s quality of life and lifestyle – the following includes illustrative quotes from the research:

- Passengers could not travel like they used to: passengers made less discretionary trips.
[“It has made it a bit of a nuisance. You don’t want to be somewhere three hours before you come back. You’re just killing time.”]
- Dependency on others increased. Many found it awkward to ask for lifts and found their travel plans now being contingent on others
[“Got to rely on people to go shopping, that’s a lifestyle change to rely on other people.”]
- Sometimes the passenger was forced to pay for an alternative
[“It’s cost me a lot more money in taxis, about £7 each way, £14 for the whole fare. It’s a big difference from £2.70 or £3.”]
- Lack of spontaneity: fewer services on fewer days reduced the opportunity to decide on the day to go out
[“I have to plan more carefully. I can’t decide to go out at the last minute.”]

⁴ [Bus Passenger Survey](#). Passenger Focus

⁵ [Bus service reductions the impact on passengers](#). Passenger Focus. July 2012

2.7 It was noticeable that many of the concerns centred on not being able to travel in the evenings or at weekends rather than not being able to travel at all. In this it was more a case of the cumulative impact on their lives rather than a single 'big-bang' issue. Those hit hardest were older people, less affluent households, those with health related issues and households containing teenagers.

Bus value for money and ticketing

2.8 Our submission so far has focussed on rural areas and some of the specific issues faced, especially by older people. We would also like to comment on younger people – another significant market for bus companies.

2.9 In a soon to be published piece of research on bus value for money and ticketing we asked people aged between 16 and 18 for their views. One of the key issues surrounded the cost of fares and, in particular, being charged as an adult when they reach 15 despite soon being required to stay in education or training until they are 18. Paying adult rates when having limited opportunity to earn an income was not felt to be fair. There was a real desire for a standardised 'student' discount/offer.

3. Rail

3.1 The rail sustainability principles recognise the social impact/contribution of rail. One of the ten main principles is about putting rail in reach of people – i.e. positioning rail as an inclusive, affordable and accessible transport system through the provision of information and accessible facilities.

3.2 As information, fares and accessibility are all areas that the Committee has previously looked at we have refrained from going into any detail here. However, we believe that building franchises around this principle is a good way of ensuring that the needs of different groups of passengers can be met.

3.3 We would however like to emphasise the importance and value of the Community Rail Partnership (CRP) concept in addressing the issue of isolation. CRPs are a bridge between the railway and local communities. Their work includes improving bus links to stations, developing walking and cycling routes, bringing station buildings back to life, art and education projects and organising special events which promote the railway and its relevance to the community. These are all things that can help address a sense of isolation.

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