

Future of Transport: rural strategy – call for evidence Transport Focus response, February 2021

Transport Focus welcomes the Government's focus on rural transport.

We promote the interests of:

- Bus, coach and tram users across England outside London
- Rail passengers in Great Britain
- All users of England's motorways and major 'A' roads (the Strategic Road Network)

Our statutory remit does not cover walking, cycling or e-bikes. Our remarks here concentrate on bus services.

With one in ten rural households having no access to a car or van¹ we recognise that the bus plays a crucial role in getting people in rural areas to work, to schools and colleges, to doctors' surgeries and hospitals, and to shops and leisure facilities, as well as connecting friends and families.

Transport Focus has carried out a number of pieces of passenger research on rural bus services.

Ten years ago we published *Rural Bus Services*, comparing the views of passengers using Herefordshire Council's tendered market day buses with those of passengers using Shropshire Council's demand-responsive Shropshire Link buses.

- We found that, 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 that if the market day bus or Shropshire Link had not been available they "would have been unable to make that trip".
- The vast majority of passengers were very satisfied with all aspects of the journey they had just made. Passengers rated very highly the way the service is provided overall (bus route, journey times and specifically for the Shropshire Link the registration process and time slots offered for pickup). However, satisfaction on 'market day buses' with the number of days a week the service was available was, relatively, more lukewarm.
- Only a minority of passengers believed their councils would listen 'a lot' to their views if the residents wished to have changes made to these services.

We followed this up in 2012 by researching the impact on passengers of cuts to their bus services, *Bus service reductions – the impact on passengers*. The four main impacts were:

¹ DEFRA statistical digest of rural England, December 2020

- Passengers could not travel like they used to: passengers made fewer 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 awkwardness to ask for lifts and 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 paid instead: passengers bore some of the costs by using taxis or other paid means of transport. “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.”

Recognising the role of effective public consultation and full transparency in promoting local accountability over cuts and changes to bus services, and at the request of the House of Commons Transport Select Committee, we also published *Bus service reviews: consulting on changes to local services – a best practice toolkit* in October 2012 and followed this up with *Bus service reviews: consulting on changes to local services – progress report* in February 2017, which highlighted in particular best practice by Wiltshire Council and East Riding of Yorkshire Council.

Demand responsive transport

It would be a mistake to ignore the economics of bus travel in rural areas. While services running along busy urban corridors can make a commercial profit, many services are more lightly used and require subsidy if they are to be maintained. People who live adjacent to main roads can be connected relatively easily to market towns and cities; it is more costly to connect those living in more isolated communities away from major roads.

To gauge how far demand responsive transport (DRT) can offer an alternative to conventional bus services in areas of relatively low demand, we published *Demand responsive transport: users’ views of pre-booked community buses and shared taxis* in June 2016, based on passenger research in Suffolk, Worcestershire and Hampshire. We concluded that:

- DRT can offer a way of providing a service where one might not otherwise exist at all.
- DRT can make a limited contribution to meeting the transport needs of isolated communities, particularly if it is introduced as part of a wider review with full public consultation. However, reductions in service frequency tend to be accompanied by falls in patronage, so any financial savings to local authorities are often achieved at a longer-term cost.

- Services which replicate a conventional bus service more closely (fixed timetable, route and multiple passengers) seem to be best received as expectations are relatively low. Delivery by voluntary organisations increases passengers' willingness to accommodate limitations and provides benefits which help offset limitations in the service.
- Services which allow for greater flexibility but, as a result, reduce predictability, are harder to use, which reduces satisfaction.
- Services which are furthest removed from the previous financially unviable service, such as shared taxis, offer a significantly different service with specific limitations and drawbacks which contributes to lower satisfaction as a public transport option.
- In its current form, DRT tends to be disproportionately used by older and disabled people and awareness among other sections of the population is generally low.
- Publicity designed to increase take-up of DRT, particularly among younger and middle-aged people and those going to work and making onward journeys, should tackle these assumptions head-on and carefully consider the practicality of addressing some of these concerns while continuing to meet the needs of current users.
- We urge local transport authorities to bear our findings in mind when considering reductions in conventional bus services and when designing, reviewing and promoting DRT services.

Since we carried out that research, newer models of app-based DRT have emerged. Services, such as *Arriva Click* and *Pick Me Up*, have shown that they can attract people out of cars, but have not yet demonstrated that they can be commercially viable, even in urban environments.

Passenger research into the views of young people

In February 2018, we published *Using the bus: what young people think*. This research included focus groups with young people in rural areas (Norfolk and Essex) as well as urban areas, in addition to interviews with young people across the country. A year later we followed up this research with a series of workshops, including some in rural areas, which were summarised in *Making bus a better choice for young people*, published in May 2019.

In many respects, young people want the same from their bus journey as their fellow passengers, ranking value for money, punctuality and reliability highly as priorities for improvement. There are, however, key differences that young people want to see addressed:

- Young people, like other passengers, want the systems they use to be straightforward, intuitive and inviting. This applies to all the different parts of

bus travel: planning the journey, finding information about routes and stops, getting advice about tickets and fares, through to actually buying the ticket.

- Using mobile apps is a familiar way to access services for young people. However, space on young people's phones is limited and, therefore, valuable. Apps must first stand out as interesting enough to download and must then prove their worth through relevance and usefulness to earn a permanent place – they must also be designed well and easy to use. Young people like using Google Maps, which comes ready installed on most smartphone devices; it does the job well, pulling different transport options together, and is seen as reliable. Young people are reluctant to download additional apps that do the same thing. Therefore, there may be more merit in collaborating on a single source, or integrating functionality into Google maps. There is additional value too in an app-based solution to minimising interaction with bus drivers and other passengers. This would help younger passengers avoid the anxiety of being 'shown up' in front of friends or other passengers when things go wrong. Many systems young people are familiar with – such as apps to book cinema tickets – offer an easy-to-use interface, downloadable tickets and tailored offers and discounts. These apps are supported by good customer service that offers individual deals and options, and that put the consumer in charge with little interaction with staff. In contrast, young people don't feel that they have any relationship with bus operators, nor do they see that offers are targeted at them, or have them in mind.
- Reliable, real-time information is key to helping young people feel confident when using the bus and improving their journey experience. They want easy-to-use, centralised and streamlined information. Young people want visual mapping and the ability to personalise their journey, across modes and operators. They want systems to 'hold their hand' through the experience and create a sense of understanding and familiarity. This includes fares shown with journey plans and at bus stops, clear information on discounts and easy ways to pay such as through smart and contactless. They also want information that updates along the journey, especially during delays, to give the cause, revised journey times and connections, supported by announcements and screens on board. While the basic needs for information and support are much the same for most bus passengers, is the industry doing enough to differentiate its offer to young people? Young people want to be engaged in the process of improving services and facilities. They want to be involved by decision-makers through social media, pop-up surveys within apps, short questionnaires on board and incentivising responses through prize draws or money-off deals.
- Young passengers want to use their time effectively and not feel bored. For them this means listening to music, using social media, browsing the internet and chatting to friends. Wi-Fi is needed to support many of these activities – and it has to be fast and reliable. When asked to rank improvements, this was young people's second highest priority. Equally important was the provision of charging points at seats, particularly when they feel their journey is longer than a short-hop.

- Young people in rural areas appeared to be more willing to walk or cycle for longer distances to get into city/town, before considering other transport methods – up to 2 or 3 miles. Some were using these methods for getting to school/college/work.

Priorities for improvement

While it is, of course, vital that people living in the countryside have access to bus services, it is also important that these services are attractive and easy to use. We have researched the views of passengers about what matters most when considering how to improve their buses, publishing *Bus passengers' priorities for improvement* in September 2020.

The research found that passengers' top priority for improvement is buses running more often, with buses going to more places a close second. The third highest priority is more buses on time. Improving value for money comes next.

Young people agreed that 'buses running more often' was the top priority for improvement. More buses on time at the stop and better value for money also featured towards the top of their lists together with faster journey times. However, having free Wi-Fi widely available as their second highest priority suggests that they place a high value on making good use of their time while they are travelling.

We also asked 1,700 non-users to rank their priorities for improvement. Buses going to more places came slightly ahead of their second highest priority, which was buses running more often followed by better value for money.

Monitoring and evaluation - passenger and non-user research

For many years, our annual Bus Passenger Survey has captured the views of bus passengers about their most recent bus journey. Our most recent survey, published in March 2020, reported on passenger satisfaction in Cambridgeshire, Cornwall, Durham, Derbyshire, Devon, Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent, Lincolnshire, Northumberland, Nottinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Staffordshire and Worcestershire against a wide range of factors, with a significant variation of scores from one authority area to another.

Transport Focus has built an enviable reputation for independent, multimodal, top quality insight and policy work which is useful to transport decision makers. Our evidence, being gathered in new and faster ways, can help the Government's focus on rural transport.

Transport Focus could assist with developing and designing measures on achieving outcomes at a national, regional and local level and publish a consumer report across modes; deliver crucial understanding of non-users' experience, barriers to use and what would encourage greater use of public transport modes. This monitoring and evaluation could be aligned with outputs from the Government's Future of Transport: Rural Strategy.