

Making sustainable transport easier for rural communities



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Making sustainable transport easier for rural communities

It is commonly assumed that owning a car is essential if you want to travel efficiently in rural areas. Sustainable transport is seen as an urban privilege facilitated by a frequent public transport system and by the closer proximity of essential services to households.

Due to dispersed population, low density and difficult terrain, providing effective public transport in rural areas has been seen as too expensive and too difficult. Transport policy in rural areas has instead focussed on extending the road network typically by building by-passes around market towns. Since the mid-80s the distance of car travel has increase by nearly a third and the number of cars on the road by nearly 50 per cent, but journey times have remained constant.¹

The focus of transport policy to encourage people to travel further and faster by road, has contributed to the growth in UK carbon emissions. The transport sector accounts for over a quarter of the UK's carbon emissions with personal car use alone contributing to 14% of the total.²

The trend to travel further and faster has also subordinated the needs of those without easy access to cars. In Gwynedd, north west Wales nearly a quarter of the county's households do not have a car and in Pembrokeshire over a fifth are car-less.³ Yet despite these statistics society is increasingly planned on the assumption that everyone is mobile. Jobs, shops, health care and leisure facilities are increasingly being closed in small villages and placed out of reach on peripheries that are inaccessible without a car. The Welsh Assembly's Rural sub-committee found that people in rural areas are more likely than their urban or valleys counterparts to travel 30 km or more to get to work.⁴

Transport poverty and the cost of rural living

A recent report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that most rural households face living costs in the order of 10–20 per cent higher than their counterparts in urban areas.⁵

Making up the single largest element of the costs was transport, followed by the cost of heating.

As fuel prices are pushed higher and become more volatile by decreasing supplies and international unrest, the lack of feasible alternatives to car travel is a significant problem for many households in rural areas. Due to infrequent and impractical public transport services many households have no alternative than to use a car to gain access to jobs, education, healthcare and goods.

Car dependency is therefore more pronounced in rural areas and this has a disproportionate impact on those on lower incomes. Cabinet Office research has found that amongst the poorest fifth of households, those who

do own cars spend nearly a quarter of their income on the cost of motoring.⁶ According to Citizen's Advice this leads many low-income families to run into debt.⁷

Fuel poverty arises when a household spends 10 per cent or more of their income on fuel to keep their home warm. Although there is no official definition of 'transport poverty', some families have to allocate a similar proportion of the family income to transport costs. Unlike fuel poverty there is no widespread acknowledgment of transport poverty and UK governments do not have specific targets to eradicate the burden. On the contrary, as fuel prices continue to rise, we can expect more and more households to suffer increased poverty and lack of access to employment and services.

Car-centric transport policy

For decades transport policy has been centred on the car, resulting in the rapid expansion of the road network and an increase in mileage that people expect and are happy to travel.

Our need to travel is directly influenced by the location of key sites and services such as schools, hospitals, employment opportunities, retail outlets, and leisure and recreation activities. The location of these services are often planned on the assumption that everyone has access to personal transport, which once again disadvantages those on lower incomes. A report for the Welsh Consumer Council concluded:

“ **Not having access to a car in a society built around the car is to be disenfranchised in a way that can impact on how you access every other kind of good or service.**”⁸

While there has historically been vast investment in roads, public transport has not received the same level of funding. Providing effective public transport in rural areas has been seen as too expensive and too difficult due to the challenges of dispersed populations, low density and difficult terrain, hence the poor service currently provided.

Low carbon transport options

If the Welsh Government’s commitment to cutting our carbon emissions by 3% every year is to be achieved, reducing carbon emissions from the transport sector is crucial.

Currently the Welsh transport contribution to the 3% target is 0.10%.

All political parties are committed to creating a sustainable transport network across Wales. While rural

areas present a different set of transport challenges to those found in urban areas we believe the three options presented below combine to provide some practical examples of how rural Wales can move towards a low-carbon transport system.

Demand responsive transport

As services such as post offices and shops continue to close in rural parts of the country, residents have to travel further to access these services.

The Countryside Alliance has estimated that people living in rural areas travel around 10,000 miles per year to access essential services – that’s 43 per cent more than residents of towns.⁹

The problems associated with rural public transport such as infrequent services, cost of fares, complex routes and inconvenient timetabling have led users to switch

to car use. On the supply side commercial operators have withdrawn after finding it difficult to operate a conventional profitable service.¹⁰ As a result there are wide disparities in public transport service levels within different rural areas. While partly due to different levels of rurality, it is also a result of varying commitments from local authorities to subsidise services.

To tackle the challenges of rural transport, some far-sighted local authorities and community groups have challenged conventional public transport structures. They have developed flexible services operated by both the commercial and voluntary sector which cater for the differing needs and requirements of older people, young people, families, working people and disabled people.

Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) is a more flexible form of bus travel that is tailored to the needs of the passengers by operating in response to pre-booked journey requests. Already well-developed in parts of Europe including Germany and Switzerland it has been successfully implemented by Monmouthshire County Council via its not-for-profit Grass Routes Community Local Bus Service for several years. Over 35, 000 passenger journeys are currently undertaken throughout the county per annum on the pre-bookable service, which draws on the services of both paid and volunteer drivers. Passenger numbers are increasing year on year in response to the development of a service which better meets the needs of county residents. The Authority

has noted over £80 000 of cost savings through the withdrawal of previously under-utilised routes in favour of their more popular DR service. Expansion of service is planned over the next year.¹¹

In the UK community transport schemes are funded by local authorities, but rely heavily on volunteers. These schemes provide an on-demand service for communities, especially for vulnerable members of society such as the elderly and individuals with poor health. The profile of these services within the community is often low-key due to a lack of available funds for marketing purposes but the service they provide is vital.

In mainland Europe DRT schemes are regarded as permanent from the outset, whereas in the UK the longevity of a scheme is less certain and depends on local authority funding which varies annually. As a result these schemes are often seen as transitory experiments, with consequently poorer passenger perceptions among non-users.

Sustainable visitor transport

Millions of tourists visit Wales each year to appreciate the country’s natural beauty in areas like our National Parks. They can however, find themselves on congested rural roads which destroys the tranquillity of their visit. In Snowdonia alone approximately 6 million people visit each year, 92% of them by car.¹² Providing Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) to rural tourist attractions such as the National Parks would enable visitors to travel more sustainably, reduce CO2 emissions and increase the safety of non-motorised road users. Ideally DRT would be available at key train and bus stations so that visitors would be car-less throughout their stay making Wales even more accessible to new visitors.



Walking and cycling

A relatively large number of people in rural areas live close to market towns. Smaller communities may only be a few miles from a town centre but there is often little incentive or facilities for individuals to walk or cycle.

For example, pedestrians and cyclists have to compete with motor vehicles on busy roads and the experience can be unpleasant and dangerous – particularly for older people and families with children.

Traffic-free paths from outlying communities to the ‘hub’ town and other measures, such as traffic calming and lower speed limits, can create a safe and attractive route for everyone including the most vulnerable users. These paths can make walking and cycling faster, more convenient and cheaper ways of travelling than car travel.

An example of where a new walking and cycling path has made an impact on the lives of a rural community is the village Llanyre in mid Wales. Despite being only two and a half miles from the busy market town of Llandrindod Wells in Powys, the only alternative to car use for the residents of Llanyre was to walk or cycle along a very busy main road. Thanks to a grant from the Welsh Government Safer Routes scheme, a new traffic free path is now used frequently by the whole community. At peak times in the morning and evening, the route is occupied by people walking and cycling to school, work or for leisure. The path also links up to the National Cycle Network, linking the town to communities and attractions further afield.

The benefits of a modal shift from driving to walking and cycling includes reduced traffic congestion and related

environmental pollution but can also significantly improve public health.

Health professionals advocate incorporating physical activity into their daily routine to maintain good physical and mental well-being. In Wales however, only 29% of adults in Wales achieve the daily recommended amount of physical activity.¹³ Physical inactivity is associated with numerous health complications including coronary heart disease, obesity and diabetes, all conditions which are on the rise in Wales. Encouraging people to walk or cycle to work or to the shops is the easiest and most cost effective way of reversing the rise in these conditions and improving public health.

To encourage this change in travel behaviour it is necessary to create safe and attractive environments for users. The National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) recommends that local authorities should apportion part of local transport budgets “to promote walking, cycling and other forms of travel that involve physical activity.” Crucially “the proportion allocated should be in line with growth targets for the use of these modes of transport.”¹⁴

In its Walking and Cycling Action Plan for 2009-2013 the Welsh Government has a target of tripling the percentage of children cycling to school in Wales and the doubling the number of adults cycling for recreation.

Changing school travel for the better in Northern Ireland

Nearly 50% of children in the UK would like to cycle to school, but only 2% do. Parents, similarly, are keen for their children to travel actively, but the fear of traffic and busy roads encourages them to drive them instead. To enable more children to travel to school independently Sustrans invited rural schools in Northern Ireland to take part in a project that aimed to create a pro-walking and cycling culture. Sustrans worked closely with the school community to create travel plans and to ensure the provision of cycle parking, high quality pedestrian crossings and new and improved walking and cycling paths for those travelling by foot and bike. At the end of the project, 33% of the pupils across the 18 schools, walked to school, compared to 20% before. In one school the number of children being driven to school fell from 82% to 52%.

Sustainable Tourism

There is untapped potential in the promotion of cycle tourism. A report, commissioned by Sustrans, revealed that the Celtic Trail between Fishguard and Chepstow (42% of which is on rural roads) generated £75 million for the south Wales economy and led to the creation or safeguarding of some 1, 400 jobs.¹⁵ By offering small grants to small businesses and social enterprises to set up cafes, cycle hire and repair there is great potential to create micro-business spin-offs from the investment made in the National Cycle Network.



Community car clubs

Not all car clubs are commercial enterprises with some local communities and co-operatives running their own schemes. A community car club in Llanidloes, mid Wales has celebrated its fourth anniversary and has a membership of 33 members sharing four cars. During the last year the total mileage driven was 40, 819 which works out at roughly 100 miles – or one return journey to Shrewsbury (the nearest large town) per month per member. The cost benefits are significant with the club co-ordinator believing he personally saves £2000 a year – a saving that will rise further as fuel prices continue to rise.



Developing car clubs in Wales

Even demand response transport cannot cater for every journey. In some cases a car is the only mode of transport.

A car club can relieve some households from the burden of owning a car or second car while giving the peace of mind that should they need a car to travel, they have access to one.

Car clubs have been established for a decade in Britain as a commercial service. Members pay for the use of a vehicle via a mix of joining fees, annual or monthly charges on an hourly or daily tariff that also includes an allowance for distance travelled. The car club operator, rather than the member pays for running costs (i.e

vehicle excise duty, insurance and vehicle maintenance) as well as fuel costs.

Despite the success in Llanidloes a feasibility report on car clubs in rural Scotland found that for many community groups the task of establishing a car club is too daunting. The report by Transform Scotland Trust concluded that support from the Scottish Government was in many cases necessary to help these groups “get started” with the initial costs and also the legalities of a scheme.¹⁶

New technology that makes booking and payment easier will help encourage car clubs to become a more attractive choice for regular users. By improving the user convenience, large employers such as local authorities can be persuaded to incorporate the use of car clubs into their staff travel plans, helping them meet their carbon reduction targets.

An effect of providing different choices, enables people to assess their journeys and change their travel behaviour. Consumer research by the CarPlus Trust found that car

club members tend to reduce car mileage in favour of public transport, walking and cycling.¹⁷ Andrew Capel, co-ordinator of Llanidloes car club agrees with these findings.

“ The reason people save money by joining a car club is because they can work out exactly how much each journey is costing them and then make the decision to wait and combine it with another trip, chose to travel by public transport if an option or not go at all.”

Travelling less far, less often

Encouraging people to make journeys by sustainable low-carbon modes of transport is crucial to tackling carbon emissions but equally as important is reducing the need to travel.

Promoting alternatives to travel does not mean stopping people travelling but helping individuals and businesses to minimise their journeys where possible and appropriate. Travelling to and from work accounts for a significant number of journeys therefore encouraging home or remote working would reduce road congestion especially at peak-times in the morning and afternoon. Many businesses and organisations are already allowing employees to work more flexibly but to facilitate and encourage a greater take up of this type of working it is essential that the Welsh Government delivers on its commitment to increasing the speed of the service in rural areas and reducing the number of ‘not spots’. Incentivising private and public sectors to

share resources can also help employees to work more flexibly. Public sector building or community centres can act as ‘technical hubs’ open to small businesses and the self-employed to share teleconferencing and videoconferencing facilities.

Better spatial planning will reduce the need for many to travel while also improving the quality of life for many individuals. The closing of Post offices, local shops and schools in rural areas have all contributed to an increase in people’s need to travel and also to the decline of community cohesion. Re-introducing these services to rural areas will not only reduce car journeys but also tackle social exclusion in the countryside.

Using technology to save miles

Kent County Council works closely with district, town, and parish councils to provide a wide range of services across the county. The council has a keen focus on cost reduction, improved efficiency and more sustainable business practice and has set itself a target to reduce work related travel by at least 10% next year. This scale of reduction will save the Council approximately £750,000 in travel-related costs and lower its carbon emissions by around 400 tonnes each year – substantially benefiting both the business and the environment

Innovation and digital technology will play a key role in reducing travel. The Council has earmarked investment to support new ways of working such as a BT MeetMe, a hosted audio conferencing service that only requires a fixed or mobile phone for access, enabling virtual meetings with up to 40 participants. But technology is only part of the story as Deborah Kapaj, Corporate Environmental Performance Programme Manager at Kent County Council, explains: “Technology is certainly a key enabler but the programme is also about behavioural change – helping our people to embrace new ways of working to further improve efficiency and operate in more sustainable ways.”

A BT Conferencing case study Kent County Council

Conclusion

A fair transport system focuses on accessibility and affordability for all, regardless of where they live. The transport modes outlined above are realistic opportunities for rural communities to travel without relying wholly on car ownership. Together, the modes form an integrated transport system that enables people to travel independently and sustainably.

Recommendations

- We would like recognition that transport poverty is as prevalent as 'fuel poverty' and has an equally negative impact on households. We would like to see a commitment by the Welsh Government to invest in alternative modes of transport to help increase social inclusion and address climate change, congestion and accident rates in rural areas.
- We believe a more secure and longer term funding programme for community and demand responsive transport schemes will enable schemes to improve and gain more visibility in communities.
- We call for greater investment in traffic-free routes that connect smaller villages to larger communities to increase the safety and accessibility of cycling and walking for everyone.
- We would like the Welsh Government to provide a package of financial and legal support to help communities start-up their own car clubs.
- We suggest that businesses and organisations should actively minimise work-related travel by encouraging more flexible working patterns facilitated by broadband and a greater sharing of resources between the public and private sector.

End Notes

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