



# TICKET TO RIDE

*Transport  
As A Main Problem in Rural Life*

# CITIZENS ADVICE RURAL ISSUES GROUP

MAY 2017

Citizens Advice is a network of 316 local charities for the purposes of providing advice that helps people to overcome their problems and campaigning on big issues when their voices need to be heard.

Within that, the Rural Issues Group is an informal group of 157 local Citizens Advice charities for the purpose of representing clients and local offices in relation to rural issues. The group works through a small steering group, and meets at an annual conference.

The purpose of the group is to identify and highlight the issues around delivering advice to rural areas, liaise with Citizens Advice, helping them to ensure that their policies are fully rural-proofed and provide a regular flow of information on new developments and good practice.

At network level, local level and RIG level, the main area of work is the giving of advice. But from time to time issues emerge that deserve more; and all three levels have a Research and Campaigns component.

The Group Chair is Jane Mordue (Trustee – Buckingham, Winslow & District).

Steering Group Membership is as follows:

- Tresanna Borgman – Wiltshire
- Peter Carefoot – Derbyshire
- Nick Hubbard – Sedgemoor
- Amy Jones – Sedgemoor
- Fran Keene – Trustee Citizens Advice
- Fred Lumb – Wiltshire
- Moira McFarlane – Northumbria
- Gwyneth Millington – Conwy
- Louise Russ – Sedgemoor
- Rachel Talbot – Cambridge

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## Foreword by RIG Chair, Jane Mordue

*'M will walk the 24 mile round trip to attend the initial meeting to receive Universal Credit as he is desperate'*

*'Bus service 67 Burnham to Wells being stopped at the end of the year'*

*'Couple in Mickleton, with mobility problems, they feel as though they are trapped in this village'*

Just three quotes from rural Citizens Advice clients which show the disproportionate impact that poor transport has on people who live in the country.

Here at the Rural Issues Group of Citizen Advice we've been asking our clients and this is what they said. We are now sharing these case studies and our analysis with key decision-makers to ask your help in tackling this problem.

This is raw data, not a glossy report. It is a conversation leading to action. If you have more evidence to add, please tell us. If you have ideas for how to solve this problem, definitely please tell us!

On Thursday 23 February held a 'summit' meeting at Citizens Advice, 200 Aldersgate St, London EC1A 4HD, to launch the report and decide what can be done.

So what is the problem? Beyond our busy towns, there is a ticking time bomb of increasing social isolation. This affects all ages. The elderly are cut off from healthcare and social contact. The young too struggle, as they can't afford the fare to work or even to sign on for benefits. It is a social blight and also a drain on the economy.

Transport is the main problem but there is a knock-on effect on employment, education, health and the environment. Oh, and you cannot go online... no broadband signal.

This report is a call to action for decision-makers.

We acknowledge that this is not an easy problem to solve. But our report shows that we are at a tipping point. The key is bus services, or lack of them. But bus services are declining faster than ever before in the countryside.

Everyone involved – government nationally, locally; transport companies, especially bus providers; and communities themselves – let's have a concerted push to stop this blight. Let's act now - rural communities deserve a ticket to ride.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Earlier in 2016 research by the Rural Issues Group produced a list of concerns of rural people and established Transport as the top priority by a significant margin. A further research project has now explored the nature of the concern and gathered evidence and case study material. The concern focuses largely on bus services.

Transport is a contributory factor in many of the problems our clients bring in. It is a critical part of our infrastructure – some people simply enjoy the journey but most have another reason for making it.

Bus services are seen as under used and uneconomic. There are many indicators that the industry is in decline and services are being reduced and withdrawn across England and Wales. A key indicator is the fact that operating costs for bus companies increased from £2.19 billion to £3.08 billion in 2015/16. This illustrates both the problems of viability and the scale of the industry. Bus passenger journeys fell by 2.6% in 2014/15; “supported mileage” fell by 26.2% in 2015/16; concessionary journeys fell by 1.3%.

However the industry remains huge and more than a billion bus passenger journeys took place in 2014/15. In 2015/16 there were 2.24 billion bus passenger journeys outside London (nationally the average is 49 per head of population).

**We acknowledge the decline, but we are concerned for those who continue to rely on bus transport.** The evidence from our questionnaire indicates that although the buses are under used, the disadvantaged – meaning older people, those with health problems, young people and those who are economically disadvantaged – still depend on bus services heavily. The motor car remains the transport of choice – for those who can afford it.

The industry employs 104000 people and uses 35000 buses.

In 2014/15 there were 9.8 million Concessionary Bus Passes in England, which is an increasing number and reflects a takeup of 80 per 100 eligible people. In non metropolitan areas 93% of passes were for older people. Disabled people are also eligible, and authorities have discretion to issue passes on other criteria. It is estimated that 68% of pass holders used their pass and 26% used it at least once a week. And that 16% of pass holders were on a low income.

The industry was privatized in 1985 and now consists of commercial operations. Commercial rigour is mitigated by a system of subsidies estimated at a total of £2.21 billion. Subsidies include Bus Services Operators Grants, Concessionary Travel and a Rural Bus Subsidy Grant. These account for 45% of the income of bus operators.

Shopping and Personal Business are the main reasons for travel. Residents in rural areas travel 44% further than urban residents. Bus trips account for less than 10% of the total distance travelled.

In March 2013 the Government published a Door to Door strategy in which it said that “The government wants more journeys to be made by sustainable transport, public transport, supported by cycling and walking”. It is concerned about congestion and emissions as well as the social and welfare issues.

25% of people have no car, on the other hand 33% have two or more cars in the household.

Statistics tell us that bus punctuality runs at 80%.

Our questionnaire produced a small number of responses, but a wealth of insight, including 39 case studies (details in Appendix A and Appendix B). Dominant concerns are about the cost of public transport, its availability, and the fact that the situation is worsening.

Services are changing in rural life. For example there are 31% less Post Offices now than in 2000.

There are significant differences between rural and urban environments.

- Less than half of those living in smaller rural settlements have access to a regular bus service.
- In urban areas, 100% of people live within 4 kms of a GP surgery, and 97% within 8 kms of a hospital; in Villages (a category of rural resident) only 65% live within 4 kms of a GP surgery and only 52% within 8 kms of a hospital.
- In Wales, for example, traffic is growing more than 13 times as fast on rural roads as on urban ones.

The problems occur in urban life as well. Numbers of people affected in rural environments are smaller, but it is suggested that effects are more severe.

There are 600 Community Transport organisations in England and Wales that provide various supporting services, largely through volunteers and largely to “Bus Pass” holders; this involves 60000 volunteers (12000 in rural areas). About a third of those serve rural areas. These provide about 8 million rural journeys each year. This is a growing sector but is not yet strong enough to be considered as a mainstream solution. Community Transport schemes benefit from Bus Services Operators Grants.

It seems clear that the local authorities are unable to find additional funding; and it is clear that the commercial viability of rural bus services is falling. Community Transport Schemes are to be commended. But they are not yet enough to significantly mitigate the problem or to “take the weight” as subsidies are withdrawn.

It is important to note the benefits of improving public transport in rural areas. ***A primary benefit can be foreseen in making rural people more employable which can be expected to have economic implications.***

Other benefits can be expected in terms of:

- Education
- Road congestion
- Sustainability
- Benefits
- Health
- Welfare
- Environmental

***The Rural Issues Group is campaigning***

- ***To raise awareness of the problems in Rural Transport***
- ***To encourage the development, support and publication of Community Transport Schemes.***
- ***To encourage any measures to improve this desperate situation.***

## Transport – The Perspective of the Citizens Advice Rural Issues Group

In 2015, attendees at the annual conference of the Rural issues Group (RIG) identified 14 areas that cause difficulty to people in rural life<sup>1</sup>:

- Access / accessibility of services
- Cost of fuel / fuel poverty
- Discrimination
- Employment – lack of - within travelling distance
- Fracking
- Housing Costs
- Internet / broadband access
- Isolation
- Lack of food deliveries
- Preserve of the Rich
- Rural Poverty
- Schools
- Transport, including cost of rural public transport, lack of access to rural transport
- Volunteer recruitment – smaller pool

In 2016, a first online survey (via Survey Monkey) established an order of priority.

The top priority by a significant margin (62%) was Transport. But people do not often come to us complaining about it directly: but they often tell us of a problem in which transport is a contributory factor.

Other priorities were Access to Services (52%), Housing Costs (39%) and Internet Access (36%).

As a result the RIG has adopted Transport as a Research and Campaigns Theme and a second survey has been carried out to identify the issues and gather evidence. The issues are discussed in this document and the evidence can be found in Appendix B.

Two respondents (7%) considered trains; responses focused almost entirely on bus services.

Bus services are taken to mean timetabled services using public service vehicles to carry passengers over relatively short distances and usually eligible for Bus Services

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<sup>1</sup> It is acknowledged that there are several authoritative definitions of “rural”. The Rural Issues Group membership includes a significant number of bureaux that are mixed - part rural/part urban. This survey invited respondents to indicate whether they were staff belonging to a member bureau, and to indicate whether they live or work in rural environments, whether they have done so, or whether they intend to do so. 88% of responses came from members of staff and 80% of respondents told us that they live in a rural environment.



Operators Grant; including school services and long distance coach services (slightly different from the government definition which excludes school services and coach services).

The ***RIG is not suggesting that rural people are the only ones suffering from difficulties relating to public transport but that these problems may be more acute for rural people where it is a simple fact of life that distances are greater.*** And we are among the first to appreciate the positive aspects of country life.

17.6% of the population of England lives in rural areas.<sup>2</sup> 21% of people are retired in rural areas, by comparison with 15% in urban England.

A second survey was designed in the autumn of 2016 to examine the problem in more detail, and the following insights emerged:

- Lack of transport is a theme that is common to all.
- Indications that the position is currently worsening are also prevalent.
- 46% of responses referred to a feeling of social and personal isolation as a consequence of the Transport Problem.
- 46% of responses referred to the cost of travel.
- Timeliness is a common comment, but it arises in several ways – as where the service does not match the purpose (eg gets pupils to school, but not in time for the start of school), where journey times are long (eg a 60 mile round trip to work takes 2 hours each way), and punctuality.
- One response highlights a problem with the Concession – which is available for use only at “off peak” times. And of course this is not helpful for young people travelling to work or travelling for education.
- Responses highlight the impact on vulnerable people – older people, the blind, the physically disabled, and those with mental health problems, for example.
- 23% of respondents refer to Digital Inclusion issues. Bus services are published online and this is a main way of obtaining information about transport. But people in rural areas are less likely to have the skills, the equipment and the connections to do so. The arrival of Broadband throughout rural life will change the travel picture.
- Several examples are provided of cases in which travel takes a significant proportion of benefits/earnings.
- The Problem has major impacts on employment and education as well as health, welfare and financial wellbeing.

So...

Bus services are run as businesses. As such they respond to commercial and financial issues – which are currently suggesting that services are less viable.

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<sup>2</sup> 2011 Census.

The public requires services as services. Irrespective of the commercial issues. This is more especially true for people living in rural areas; and more especially true still for disadvantaged and vulnerable people such as the disabled and those with mental health problems, and the elderly.

## Our Research

### Methodology

This research began with a trawl of opinions at a conference of the Citizens Advice Rural Issues Group by reference to a whiteboard and sticky notes. The question was “What are the concerns of Rural people?” and it yielded a useful list of concerns.

This was followed by two online Questionnaires by reference to Survey Monkey.

The first was designed to prioritise the concerns identified so far and it used closed questions to obtain statistical facts.

Transport was emphatically at the top of the list, and the second Questionnaire was designed using very open questions to identify more detailed insights and aspects of that concern and to gather evidence in the form of case studies.

There is some difficulty with the use of the word “rural”. It is noted that the distinction is always difficult – and this is complicated by the fact that many bureaus are actually mixed: part urban and part rural. Firstly we published the surveys through the Rural Issues Group Community. We accepted responses from anyone interested. In the first online survey 92% of respondents lived/worked in a rural environment, had previously done so or considered the possibility of doing so in future.

The final stage has been “desk research” of existing source material online and on paper to develop as complete and understanding of the problem as possible.

## Discussion

### Disclosed by Our Survey

In the RIG Survey “Making Transport a Priority” (see Appendix A), 46% of respondents expressed concern about cost.

One respondent illustrated how cost is an issue in that many of our clients have come to us mainly because of financial problems; another explains that clients must spend £6.40 to travel to the nearest Job Centre to “sign on” (three more respondents also comment on the cost of travelling to sign on”); a third reports sudden and large (58%) increases in fares; a fourth reports that clients are unable to secure work because they are unable to meet the cost of travel that is required; a fifth provides a case study of a homeless man with no money who must travel 24 miles to “sign on”; a sixth reports that clients are unable to access help from foodbanks because they need to travel to do so; two respondents comment on the difficulties of study/apprenticeships when travel is required.

Timeliness can be an issue in several ways. It may be that the service is available on days or times so as to be unsuitable for the purpose (eg children being directed to services that do not get them to school before school starts); other examples have emerged in which journey times are too long (eg a case in Shropshire involving a 60 mile round trip to work involving six buses (3 each way) and taking 2 hours each way); two respondents comment about buses failing to keep to published timetables.

Lack of a transport service is common to all responses: numerous villages and areas are identified that have no bus service. 16% of responses referred to withdrawals of service.

The evidence from our questionnaire indicates that although the buses are under used, the disadvantaged – meaning older people, those with health problems, young people and those who are economically disadvantaged – still depend on bus services heavily. The motor car remains the transport of choice – for those who can afford it.

From the emerging evidence, impact can be identified on benefits problems, employment problems, education and health problems. As well as the aspect of social isolation, and linked to existing problems of Digital Exclusion.

46% of respondents referred to a feeling of isolation as one of the consequences of transport problems.

Responses highlight the impact of the Transport problem on people who are blind, people with mental health problems and people with other disabilities.

One response refers to the Travel Concession: the Concession applies only to “off peak” times – which are unhelpful to young people with disabilities, on minimum wage and travelling for work.

One response refers to Industrial Action making things worse.

It is clear that the elderly are particularly aware of transport problems: responses contain eight references to age and pensions. The young also find difficulty travelling to school, college and work (7 references, see also case studies in Appendix B).

23% of respondents refer to Digital Inclusion (cost/availability of broadband). Bus services are published online and this is a main way of getting information about transport. People in rural areas, and especially older clients, are less likely to have the skills, the equipment and the connections to do so.

### **Disclosed in other Work**

*State of Rural Public Services 2013, published by the Rural Services Network.*

Less than half of those living in smaller rural settlements have access to a regular bus service (ie within 13 minutes walk).

Households in the smallest rural settlements spent 63% more on travel than households in urban areas in 2009.

In urban areas, 100% of people live within 4 kms of a GP surgery, and 97% within 8 kms of a hospital; in Villages 65% of people live within 4 kms of a GP surgery, and 52% within 8 kms of a hospital.

In March 2013 there were 6429 post offices in rural areas, which is 55% of the nation’s network – and which is 31% less than in 2000, and cuts have continued.

Increasingly, rural people are compelled to travel for postal services.

In 2011/12 there were 600 community transport organisations.

*Round The Bend – A review of local bus provision by Scottish Citizens Advice Bureaux*

55% of Scottish bus users felt that buses are good value for money. Prices were found to vary from 7p/mile to £1.80/mile.

38% of locations surveyed had no Sunday service that connected them with local hospitals

In remote rural areas the median cost of a return ticket to the nearest Job Centre was £9.00

Consumers in the rural areas surveyed face an average 40 minute round trip to access the nearest bank branch

Residents of rural areas were on average 5 miles from the nearest GP surgery

College students in remote areas on average face journey times of over an hour and at a median cost of £10 return.

In 2014 it was estimated that around 420 million bus passenger journeys were made in Scotland with these journeys covering over 330 million kilometres per year. There are 1.3 million holders of a National Concessionary Travel Scheme Card, who travel free at the point of use.

38% of those using buses in Scotland have an income of less than £15000 per year.

86% of bus users live in urban areas.

## Conclusions

We conclude that the main aspects of the Transport problem for rural people are:

- cost,
- lack of services
- and the fact that the situation is worsening.

But improving public transport in rural areas would have a wide range of benefits.

Thinking about the time that is wasted in traffic congestion and delays caused by the use of public transport, that time may well be paid time – expensive to an employer. Where the employer is public sector, the bill falls ultimately back to the taxpayer. And employee is private sector, the cost ultimately damages the economy.

Transport is a factor that directly affects people economically; it also affects education, employment, health and many other aspects of life. Several respondents emphasised the fact that people often simply feel isolated. To categorise the benefits as being welfare is a massive understatement.

The RIG recognises that it will be enormously difficult to improve the situation. The need to do so is undermined by the fact that it is a minority that is affected, and by the fact that some services are under used and uneconomic. However ***bus use still helps millions of people millions of times a year, and those users need a service and deserve one.***

***The Rural Issues Group is campaigning***

- ***To raise awareness of the problems in Rural Transport***
- ***To encourage the development, support and publication of Community Transport Schemes.***
- ***To encourage any measures to improve this desperate situation. This may mean increasing the funding for subsidies; it may mean reviewing fares and/or services.***

It is important to note the wide benefits of improving public transport in rural areas.

The primary benefit that can be expected is of making rural people more employable, by providing them with a realistic means of getting to work.

Other benefits can be expected in terms of:

- Education – which also impacts on employment and the economy
- Sustainability
- Road congestion
- Benefits
- Health
- Welfare.