

Rural transport and accessibility matters

Top tips for elected members who want to ensure cost effective approaches to improve rural accessibility and transport

Why is rural transport important?

Households spend over 15 per cent of all they earn on transport, and accessibility is highly valued by all ages and sectors of society. Successful approaches to improving rural transport and accessibility:

- build partnerships across sectors
- lead the media debate rather than respond to it
- put community needs first
- measure the changes being made
- work closely with transport businesses and social enterprises to deliver efficient services.

What is the elected member's role?

Transport is the glue that holds together rural economies and societies so members should check that all the connections are being made. Many departments in local authorities can be involved in delivering different bits of the transport system. The needs of residents and businesses can easily fall into the gaps between services.

Key questions

Who is losing and who is gaining from transport change?

How do we know that everyone's needs are being met – is the authority measuring what the public actually want?

Where people are facing accessibility barriers what action is being taken to overcome them?

Are collaborations with other public agencies and partnerships with operators delivering efficiency savings?

What are the responsibilities of local authorities?

Local authorities have the lead role in ensuring that people can access the services and places they need.

Local authorities do not control how health authorities, local businesses and others spend their transport budgets but they can build partnerships to help all businesses and agencies in the area make best use of the resources and skills available.

Key tips

Take advantage of responsibilities like preparing local transport plans and rural bus strategies to get partners engaged with delivery.

Adhere strictly to the performance standards they define for themselves covering duties such as maintenance and improvement of roads, paths and public transport infrastructure.

Define delivery roles and responsibilities clearly with partners for responsibilities such as supported fares (concessionary, travel, taxicard, social, medical), and information and marketing.

Policy and performance

Is policy clear?

People who live and work in rural areas expect poorer accessibility than their urban counterparts but they need more certainty about council transport plans. Withdrawing a lifeline rural bus service, without planning in advance with the community alternative accessibility arrangements, undermines trust and devalues the policy making process.

The Local transport plan and progress reports should ensure that all of the changes which will be made can be planned in advance, discussed with the community, and practical and affordable ways to improve transport and accessibility identified.

Key tips

Make sure all policy statements are backed up with action, and explain what the council can and cannot do.

Transport is complex and affects many sectors. Don't assume that all council staff with different roles will necessarily all agree, or that things will just happen because there is a policy. Get policy teams to work with operational managers to make policy real, and build commitment to delivery.

Decide what you want to change and then ensure that management incentives are in place to deliver (i.e. contracts to ensure that the people and businesses involved will do better if the Council's goals are met).

Check what partner agencies, residents and businesses have said about the policy aims.

How well is the authority doing?

The time and cost involved in reaching work, shops, leisure and other opportunities varies across the country. Some national comparisons are available but standards are best set locally.

Key tips

Measure what they want to achieve and monitor progress.

Move quickly to change things that are not working. In many rural areas accessibility has been getting worse with declining bus services, rural facilities closing (for example post offices) and growing road congestion.

Ask who wins or loses from investment (or funding cuts). Reacting to justifiable complaints that people have been unfairly treated undermines trust in the authority. Balanced programmes with investment (or cuts) distributed fairly tend to be supported and sustainable.

Partnerships, Skills and Communication

Building successful partnerships

Most transport investment involves a shared commitment between the local community and the authority.

If people, agencies and businesses are invested in delivering the solutions then they are much more likely to support the outcomes.

Partnerships can easily get bogged down so need to retain a clear project delivery focus, for example, to improve information about accessing a hospital.

For any partner, continued participation within a project partnership should be conditional on them delivering some element of the project.

Making the Connections

Are land use planning, education, health and transport criteria clear?

Often important decisions are made without the transport implications being fully costed: from the site of a new school or a change in service delivery approaches, to the location of new housing.

If these decisions are not made appropriately, then the council could find that transport could be unaffordable and unsustainable. To ensure that the principles for joint working between transport and other sectors are clearly defined, accessibility strategies are a key part of local transport planning.

Key tips

State the terms on which a change or development might be supported or rejected on transport grounds.

Check that everyone's needs are being met.

Allocate budgetary responsibilities for ensuring the policies will be delivered

Is the skill mix right?

It is important to ensure that a mix of skills in marketing, people management, vehicles, technical standards, and design are deployed within transport planning and delivery.

Transport is often more attractive as a career choice to people who like vehicles and infrastructure, than to people who care more about interactions with people.

Key tips

Check that there is no gap between technical led solutions and the evidence of public needs.

Note that skills in fundraising are becoming more important. Partnering with organisations like community transport groups, businesses and local residents groups who have a track record in fundraising will help to ensure the skills are available. An additional advantage of this approach is that it not only improves funding prospects, but it also helps to scale community expectations to realistic levels.

Media and marketing

Authorities are facing ever greater pressures in the information age. Reacting to the media will not be supportable during times of tight financial pressures.

Transport plans will not be delivered unless they are marketed in partnership with local businesses and community organisations. It is important to check that:

- the authority has a bus information partnership with local operators to ensure that people receive common messages and that the authority is not inadvertently subsidising or replacing commercial marketing.
- marketing of the transport offer includes large corporate purchasers of transport like the NHS and large local employers.
- a planned approach is taken to good news stories about transport in the community are used to explain the authority's plans.

- routine information such as publishing notices about road closures is integrated into the marketing strategy.

Funding

The trend towards community funding

Transport and accessibility issues currently punch well below their weight in many partnership plans. Transport can get large increases in investment if the case for community funding is based on:

- improving access to services – if access to jobs is a priority within community plans, then the partnership plans, such as local area agreements, need to pay for the transport that helps jobseekers get to work
- building a clean, strong inclusive community – regeneration projects that involve new traffic systems should be viewed within cross-sectoral plans for the local and regional economy attracting development funding and community planning investment.

Balancing the budgets

By far the largest funder of rural transport is travellers themselves through car purchase, fuel, taxi fares, parking charges and public transport fares. If a change in local authority spending (for example, support for an evening bus service) levers a large change in spending by travellers (for example, more general bus use) then these funding decisions need particular attention.

When funding declines there can be a tendency to retrench and defend budgets rather than rebalance the available budgets. This can have the double disadvantage of reducing the prospects for efficient delivery as well as reducing the prospects for new funding.

Key questions

What would be the impacts of asking other funders to pay more for example by increasing bus fares to reduce subsidy levels?

Who would be affected by funding changes? A focus on people rather than services helps to ensure changes are inclusive and sustainable.

Is everyone doing their bit? – e.g. if rural businesses do not have staff and business travel plans then do they actually understand their own transport needs?

Can investment be used to lever other funding?

Where are the potential efficiency savings and how can they be achieved?

The case for reduced fares

The national free bus fares scheme is not predominantly a rural policy. Rural authorities therefore need to invest in fares and modes which provide suitable services for all people. It is important to check:

- Who cannot benefit from the free bus scheme and what support should they be given to be able to use flexible modes at affordable costs.
- What is the best local approach to taxicard or voucher schemes to complement the national free bus fares scheme to ensure that all local needs are met.

Ideas for delivering the connections

Responding to demand

As bus services have been withdrawn over the years, rural communities have been left isolated. While many people will have access to cars for their journeys, many also will not. Across the country, a variety of schemes have been implemented to fill the gap left by the bus service reductions.

If demand is low, then ways to ensure that people can still get access include:

- using a smaller vehicle – scheduled shared cars or taxis have proved to be excellent solutions in the remotest areas – these usually involve contracts with taxi operators rather than bus companies to run scheduled services
- flexible routing of buses to respond to demand – many buses operate to fixed schedules but can divert off core routes on demand which helps to keep journey times competitive by allowing buses to stick to core routes, but lets other travellers to get access to core services when they need them
- offering services that only run when booked – demand responsive services can be specified to operate within areas or at particular times of day – in general, the longer people book in advance, the more that service operators can match trips, and the cheaper the fares become.

When does co-ordinated delivery work?

Through the money spent on school transport and adult services, local authorities already invest very significant amounts of money in rural transport.

Once hospital transport is added in, the overall amount being spent by the public sector is very large indeed.

Key tips

It is important be clear how much is being spent on transport and by whom.

Purchasing functions should be clearly separated from delivery functions.

Coordination of purchasing functions offers substantial scope for cost savings, particularly if purchasers can agree common standards for vehicles, staff and technology.

There are some places where in-house delivery units have been funded across sectors, but cross-sector funding is more easily achieved if transport, social services, health and education all contract a third party such as a commercial or social enterprise to run their services.

What about the voluntary sector?

Community transport organisations link local volunteers with transport delivery resourcing more transport than would be possible with public funding alone.

Community transport (CT) is a major provider of transport for taking people to hospital, assisted travel for people with particular mobility needs, social services transport such as to adult care services, and employability services such as wheels to work.

Key tips

Recognise that the motives of volunteers are critical to ensure that input is maximised and public policy aims are delivered. Many volunteers are motivated by social, environmental and community aims rather than transport in itself. However some volunteers like driving or working with vehicles.

Sometimes paid local authority staff can help CT groups with paperwork and other support activities to help maximise voluntary staff inputs, since few people volunteer to do paperwork.

Enter into a service level agreement or contract that specifies what will be delivered, and what happens if delivery does not happen. In the past, grant-funding was a common way to fund voluntary sector organisations, but better relationships are achieved if the expectations of both parties are clearly set out.

Specifications in service level agreements should require information from CT groups on trip making, service users and trip purposes. The general principle of money for information is essential to maintain good value in the CT sector.

Working with operators

A regular and open dialogue with bus, taxi and CT operators is important. This allows problems to be aired and mutually beneficial solutions identified.

Key tips

Large operators can bring scale and resources into rural areas but local operators can offer better value within local areas or niche markets and a market growth amongst rural operators can be important for rural economic development.

If there are poor relationships between the council and a bus operator it is important to fix this quickly. Most relationships can be managed through a partnership agreement defining the roles, responsibilities and aims of each partner.

Key players in rural transport

Elected members should review how plans relate to those of partners. Check that the terms of partnership working are defined clearly for at least the following partners:

- central Government and Department for Transport
- local strategic partnerships
- neighbouring local authorities
- parish councils
- regional development agencies and regeneration agencies
- passenger transport executives if relevant.
- NHS organisations
- voluntary sector organisations and community development bodies
- Job Centre Plus
- transport operators – bus, taxi, rail, community
- residents groups, businesses
- lobby groups, transport campaigners