

TravelWatch NORTHWEST

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Winner of CILT award for best practice in passenger transport (2013)

promoting quality public transport.....

Peter French
 The County Councils Network
 Local Government House
 Smith Square
 London SW1P 3HZ

14th May 2020

Dear Mr French,

The decline of rural buses: A Joint Inquiry by the County APPG and CCN

Introduction

1. TravelWatch NorthWest is an independent Community Interest Company representing all public transport users in North West England. We are pleased to give our views to this inquiry.

2. People rely on buses for a whole range of activities for education, work, social, business and recreational purposes. Buses play a key role in providing an alternative to private transport and hence creating a more environmentally sustainable transport mix.

3. The decline in bus services over the past twenty or thirty years or more has left large areas with no bus services at all and many more with only a basic residual service with few if any journeys in evenings or at weekends. Cuts in local authority budgets have accelerated the situation. Even in major cities it can be impossible to get to hospitals, entertainment or restaurants in the evening because services do not run into the mid to late evenings. The decline has had a serious impact on the rural economy and this has spread to suburban and even some urban areas.

4. The decline in rural communities has reached crisis point in many parts of the country with the closure of post offices, banks, village shops, pubs and bus services. Some parts have become uninhabitable by anyone without a car and younger people cannot afford to remain in rural communities and are moving en masse to large cities. A few local community bus services have been provided in some areas, usually operated with volunteer drivers, but these cannot adequately replace scheduled services available to all passengers. The tourist industry has suffered, especially in national parks, because of the reducing accessibility by public transport and the resulting

serious congestion caused by too many cars attempting to use narrow country lanes. Funding for local initiatives has been precarious and difficult to obtain and sustain.

Effects on Society

5. The cost to the NHS and social care budgets as a result of people having no access to transport, not to mention the damage to local economies, is likely to outweigh the savings that have been achieved by Councils. There has been increased cost to the public purse through unemployment benefit, housing benefit, increased healthcare costs (buses keep people healthy), etc. The impact has been greatest in rural communities, where residents have lost essential links to the rest of society, resulting in social isolation. The cuts have also adversely affected businesses as people travel into towns by bus to spend money in shops, restaurants, pubs, etc. These cross-sector benefits should have been included in some way in the buses "balance sheet".

6. Local Transport Authority (LTA) lack of support for rural and less used services has led to loneliness and isolation for so many who now have a free bus pass but no service to use it on.

Community Transport

7. Community Transport has/is playing a role but we aspire to its integration into the network of commercial and supported services. Replacing bus services with Demand Responsive (DRT) and Community Transport (CT) has not always been effective and such services are often not accessible for all visitors, not just tourists, to the area. Scheduled bus services provide a means of transport which people can choose to use, while CT and DRT are transport means of last resort. CT and DRT services have a much higher cost per passenger than bus services, so spending on them actually benefits fewer people. On a pound for pound basis there may be better public benefit in supporting a timetabled bus service than a community transport service.

8. It is essential that any CT style services are open to all users and that their existence is well publicised nationally as well as locally to ensure maximum awareness. This is especially important as visitors from other areas e.g. the towns and cities - to attractions; walking etc - are an important rural economic benefit. Consideration could also be given to allow free travel to concessionary pass holders on rural community transport with the extra cost being funded by central government. This could help to stem further decline and the growing number of villages now ending up with no service whatsoever.

Information and Accessibility

9. We understand that the Bus Services Act provides for measures to improve information which can go some way to making bus travel more attractive and hopefully contribute to reversing the decline. Accurate real time information at

bus stops and next stop information on buses would help prospective passengers' confidence in using buses.

10. Whereas most buses are now fully accessible, many bus stops still do not meet the required standards. As people get older and less mobile they are forced to stop travelling by bus simply because some Local Authorities have failed in their duty to make bus services accessible. A fully accessible bus service generates users as it makes the service so easy to use - especially important for parents with young children and the less mobile. Improving bus stops in this way need not be expensive.

Fares & Integration

11. As well as funding cuts, very high fare levels in some rural areas have tended to price off most passengers who do not have concessionary fares, resulting in very high proportions of passengers travelling on free passes. The reduction of reimbursement for concessionary travel is a major factor in the loss of commercial services with replacement services not being provided by Local Transport Authorities.

12. Exercises we have conducted in the past have shown the difficulty of finding out about bus fares before travelling. In 2014 we carried out an exercise (following a similar one in 2009) to demonstrate the ease of finding out the cost of bus fares before travelling. In 2009 the conclusion was that bus fare information can only be obtained by actually making the journey or telephoning the operator or operators concerned. Web based journey planners such as Traveline or Transport Direct were of no help. The 2014 report found that since the 2009 report no progress had been made on making bus fares information more widely available since the original exercise was carried out. Indeed in some respects the situation had worsened. Traveline and Transport Direct (now closed) were unchanged in respect of lack of fares information, most bus company websites did not give ordinary single or return fares and it was lamentable that many bus station enquiry offices had closed.

13. The situation today appears to be little improved in our region. Traveline says "in most cases you'll need to contact the transport operator for fares information. We're working on getting access to bus fares but at the moment they're only available to us electronically on each transport operator's website." However bus operator's websites do not, in the main, give specific fares information for individual journeys, at best often just a range of prices relating to "length of journey" (as well as multi journey day and other period tickets). After all this time there is still a long way to go.

14. The move towards new technologies is to be welcomed (e.g. smart cards and contactless payment) which will help to alleviate slow boarding times caused by passengers finding correct change.

15. Lack of integration between bus services and with rail services is another major issue. There is a need to give higher priority to integration and co-operation than to preventing collusion between operators. It is difficult for local transport authorities to plan effective long-term networks, while buses compete with, rather than complement, rail and light rail services. Bus use could be encouraged by removing some of the anti-competition rules which inhibit multi-operator return and other tickets.

16. The unfortunate closure of the useful transport information centres at Carnforth, Clitheroe and Nelson has not helped the cause of better integration.

Concluding Remarks

17. In February this year we welcomed the government's announcement of extra funding for bus services (£5bn), and said that much of this should be used to fund the reinstatement of bus routes which have vanished in recent years due to cuts in Local Council funding.

18. These routes would include vital links in rural areas so people could get to jobs, education, healthcare and shops as well as early morning, evening and weekend services in all areas which are essential for all those people in low paid jobs whose working hours are 9 till 5.

19. We stressed (and continue to do so) that to achieve this would require the funding to be paid as revenue grants to Local Authorities and it must be ring fenced so it can only be spent on providing bus services.

20. In summary as there is no legal obligation to provide local bus services, Local Transport Authorities may support them but, as spending cuts have deepened, support has fallen drastically and for one authority at least – Cumbria CC – there has been a complete cessation of all support. We strongly believe that the provision of a socially necessary network should be an essential rather than a discretionary duty.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond

Yours sincerely,

John A Moorhouse

John Moorhouse, Company Secretary