

TravelWatch NORTHWEST

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

promoting quality public transport.....

Rachel Maclean, Under Secretary of State,
 Department for Transport
 Zones 1-3, Floor 3, Great Minster House
 33 Horseferry Road
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15th February 2021

Dear Under Secretary of State,

Future of Transport Rural Strategy Call for Evidence.

1. Introduction

1.1 TravelWatch NorthWest (TWNW) is an independent Community Interest Company representing all public transport users in North West England. We are pleased to give our response to this consultation.

2. Trends

Dependence on the private car

2.1 "Residents in rural areas continue to be dependent on private cars for mobility". However, as the paper also points out there are many people including the elderly living in the countryside who cannot drive. Furthermore, the number of people who do not have access to a car is increased by one car families where the car is not available to the home-based part of the family for much of the working day.

Access to key services and employment

2.2 The paper refers to "infrequent and sometimes declining public transport". In many rural areas 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.

Social Isolation

2.3 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, young people cannot afford to remain in rural communities and are moving en masse to cities. Tourism has suffered, especially in national parks, because of the reducing accessibility by public transport and resulting serious congestion caused by too many cars on narrow country lanes. Funding for local initiatives has been precarious and difficult to obtain and sustain.

2.4 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”.

2.5 Given the emphasis the document puts on innovation and technology and that IT-based solutions have a large role to play, it is surprising that the lack of high-speed broadband connections in rural areas isn’t included as an “issue”.

3. Developments in innovation for rural transport

Increasing use of active travel modes & micromobility

3.1 We are not convinced that e-bikes and e-scooters could play a significant role in rural transport. Users of e-bikes would find the same safety issues on rural roads that the consultation correctly identifies for conventional cyclists. In particular, the idea that e-bikes could cater for the “last mile” of journeys by linking to public transport fails to appreciate the security issues involved in leaving very expensive equipment unattended in rural areas for lengthy periods of time. The same objections apply to e-scooters with the obvious addition of their unsuitability for the carriage of shopping or other luggage.

More effective integration of journeys

3.2 The statement that “commonly, more than one mode or service is required to complete a journey in rural areas” is not supported by any evidence or example. Given that the overwhelming majority of such journeys are currently made by car it is unlikely to be correct. We do though welcome innovation in infrastructure to support the linking of services such as mobility hubs.

Digital modes for more effective services

3.3 The idea that “digitally-enabled models” of demand-responsive transport can offer a solution once again fails to take into account the poor quality of many rural broadband services.

3.4 Demand-responsive transport is significantly more expensive per-passenger journey to provide than conventional bus services and that, unlike buses, the cost increases with demand due to the flexible and individual nature of the service offered. Given the concentration of services for rural areas in market towns and the standardised opening hours of things such as shops, offices and surgeries there is actually very little need for “flexible” services in rural areas. Money would be much better spent enhancing fixed-route, non-bookable services that if operating frequently enough can provide sufficient flexibility for most needs at much lower cost. That said, some mobile App based schemes such as Go2 Sevenoaks appear successful, though in an urban environment.

Data and digital improvements unlocking market knowledge.

3.5 See paras 4.8 – 4.9 below for comments on improving information.

New modes of transport

3.6 We do not see drones or “autonomous electric aircraft” having a significant role to play in rural communities. Most rural public transport users would be happy with a regular bus. Drones would offer fewer journeys against journeys which need to be made.

Rural Community Identity

3.7 We understand and appreciate the points made with no further comments.

4. Building upon Future of Transport principles

The Urban principles

4.1 Many of the urban principles are only partly relevant to rural areas largely because of the significant differences in population density and land use characteristics. That is not to say that the demand for rural transport does not have its pressures, very often down to tourism and related matters (see also below)

Encouraging transport innovation in rural areas

4.2 The consultation seems to be largely concerned with the possibility of using new technological means to improve transport possibilities in rural areas. We believe that much can be done to improve the existing means of rural transport which may be immediately more productive than some of the esoteric ideas in the paper. We have therefore used this section to make some suggestions which may not seem to be particularly innovative but could give practical help to improving the current situation.

4.3 We consider that Local authorities are best placed to develop transport services in rural areas given their local knowledge and understanding. Funding is of course the main stumbling block. Funding will, presumably, have to come from central government as local authorities have no means of raising the necessary funding. Therefore, it follows that Transport Authorities should be compelled by statute to apply Government funding to this sector by hypothecation, rather than just withdrawing it as a political gesture. We consider that the role for the private sector is extremely limited if it is expected to work on a commercial basis.

4.4 Additionally, with the Government's drive to create new housing and industrial development in rural areas, often on green belts, public transport needs to be a statutory consideration in the Planning process and in Local Authority Development Plans. These are likely to come up for renewal in 2025 and the PT element must be strengthened.

4.5 To make better use of resources we suggest consideration is given to the following -

- Use of school transport in between school trips. For example, the 552 Kendal – Arnside was operated twice daily by Stagecoach. It was cross subsidised from the schools contract that Cumbria CC gave it as buses would have been available on “back journeys” but when the CC changed the contract and appointed a coach company for the schools Stagecoach withdrew it. The coach company had no interest in running scheduled services. An example of no lateral thinking by CCC.
- More co-operation/ co-ordination amongst the various public service (e.g. health associated) and goods delivery vehicles, etc. For example, the return of post buses – in remote areas they were a useful link until security regulations apparently put paid to this.
- A greater emphasis on connectivity and hubs

4.6 Community Transport (which gets little mention) has a role to play but we aspire to its integration into the network of commercial and supported services. It is essential that any such 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 should 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.

4.7 The consultation appears to ignore the converse current and potential movement of people from urban areas to rural areas. Current locally operated timetables for local buses often consist of a service from the villages into the nearest town for shopping in the morning and back in the afternoon to return shoppers to the villages. This misses out on the rural tourist potential of the

villages - hikers, people enjoying the countryside etc. who could be attracted by a service in the opposite direction.

4.8 Publicity for existing services needs improving! For example, we understand that Stagecoach omits other operators' services on its routes, or links to them on publicity and websites as do most operators on their websites. It is difficult for visitors to find local services who do not know the local operators name, and County websites are not often updated quickly when there is a change in a local operator's service.

4.9 Other measures to make bus travel more accessible are those which we have cited on many occasions in the past. In particular -

- Information and Accessibility - accurate real time information at bus stops and next stop information on buses is often poor and its provision would help prospective passengers' confidence in using buses. Whereas most buses are now fully accessible, many bus stops still do not meet the required standards.
- Fares - very high fare levels in some rural areas have tended to price off many passengers who do not have concessionary fares. Additionally, exercises we have conducted throughout our region in the past have shown the difficulty or even impossibility of finding out about bus fares before travelling.
- Integration – a lack of integration between bus services and with rail services is another major issue. There is a need to give a higher priority to integration and co-operation than to preventing collusion between operators.

4.10 No mention is made of rural rail services which may well be shortly under threat with the treasury's present deficit but are often underdeveloped, minimising usage. For example, the Lancaster - Morecambe line would require just 2 miles of electrification to allow through electric services from Manchester/Liverpool and other North West centres of population. However, currently the core train service is a diesel shuttle from Lancaster despite the proposed Eden Centre being expected to bring in 500,000 extra visitors a year.

4.11 There could also be the potential for operating public services on heritage railways. This is not always straight forward but deserving of further investigation.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond.

Yours sincerely

John A Moorhouse

John Moorhouse Company Secretary