

TRANSPORT SOLUTIONS IN RURAL AREAS CONFERENCE

THURSDAY 10TH SEPTEMBER

FURNESS & MIDLAND HALL, CARNFORTH STATION, LANCASHIRE

CONFERENCE NOTES

1. Introduction

Christine Knights, Board Member, Passenger Focus

Christine welcomed delegates and introduced the subject matter of the conference. She indicated that transport in rural areas remained a challenge to both stakeholders and operators alike and solutions still needed to be found, although there was unlikely to be a "one size fits all". The conference would bring together a number of examples where solutions had been found and she hoped that some positive ideas could be provided to help solve some of the issues.

2. Rural Transport – What are the Options

Paul Fawcett, TravelWatch North West

Paul began by posing the question "What is Rural?" His view was that it is mainly defined by economic issues, many of which have special characteristics in country areas. He went on to describe the major rural transport problems, the series of issues affecting access and mobility and the various interventions affecting rural transport provision since the 1960's.

His prognosis suggested a total re-appraisal of the Grant Funding system for rural transport and predicted that government intervention with a new approach would be put forward quite soon. Local government was still the most significant supporter of rural transport. He gave a list of hybrid transport examples followed by some Wider Welcome examples that would benefit the economy of rural areas. He described a series of Cross Sector benefits that would result from improved accessibility to rural public transport and concluded as follows –

- Rural Transport will always need revenue subsidy and working capital.
- Conventional urban solutions are often not applicable.
- There is scope for partnership approaches (ACORP, RTPs etc).
- Cross Sector Benefits need to be captured

3. The Dales & Bowland Community Interest Company

Colin Speakman, Dales & Bowland Community Interest Company

Colin began by describing the threats that faced leisure bus services in the Yorkshire Dales that led to this initiative. Varying legislation was restrictive to operations and Transport Authorities were abdicating their responsibilities in transport provision. Other agencies often claimed that it was not their responsibility to find solutions for diminishing public transport and services

were beginning to disappear, leading to greater car use. The Yorkshire Dales Society took up the challenge, creating a Public Transport User Group which evolved into a Community Interest Company. This was structured to enable access to and management of partnership funding.

The company set up a series of transport projects to entice visitors to the Dales by the provision of Sunday buses linked to attractions and organised walks. However a series of funding cuts by principal funders - North Yorkshire County Council and the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority created the need for some "shock and shame" tactics and a small workable budget was achieved. A great deal of energy was put into examining opportunities where buses were under used, particularly after completing schools duties, and operators were persuaded to provide leisure services with available vehicles. This gave rise to the Dales Bus service and the incremental successes gave the company confidence to seek enhanced funding. The result was a £77,000 partnership allowing expansion of services even linking direct from Bradford. Passenger numbers in 2009 had been strong and proved the demand. Now a comprehensive integrated network was in operation across the Dales.

Marketing has been targeted toward segments such as students and young adults with incentive fares and services timed to suit. The 2009 operations look like producing a 30% increase in passengers.

The success has been achieved only by the efforts of dedicated volunteers, commitment and cooperation of operators and consequently winning the trust of the local authorities and public sector agencies.

4. Demand Responsive Services in Rural Shropshire Matt Johnson, Shropshire County Council

Matt introduced his subject by describing the rural dominance in the county of Shropshire, a county with a population of 290,000. The Shropshire Link service had been designed to provide a demand responsive transport service to link rural communities to major centres and interchanges. It operates by a passenger registration system and pre-booking by telephone.

The key principles of the service are to increase rural accessibility, reduce environmental impact of car travel, and achieve better integration and interchange whilst providing value for money and efficiency.

Services have been provided by new accessible low floor vehicles on core direct routes providing a comprehensive Monday – Saturday service with clock face timetables.

Between December 2008 and August 2009 almost 15,000 passenger trips had been recorded and representing an increase of 61% in rural trips. The system operates on a £2.50 flat fare basis.

A recent 6 month passenger satisfaction review had revealed a 73% "excellent" rating and the indications are that a year on year target of 15% growth in passengers is achievable.

5. Morning Panel Session

The 3 morning speakers formed the panel and discussion revolved around issues from their presentations.

Marketing and Information of services presented challenges as funding for this was often difficult to achieve. Websites are a primary use but there is a need for long term commitment of funding to underpin the marketing messages that can be put out both by electronic and printed media. Much effort is put into services integrating with other modes of travel at transport interchanges and to provide seamless travel opportunities. However in some cases it has to be accepted that rail/bus integration is impossible to achieve in rural locations due to operational constraints.

Discussion also covered the use of services by residents and visitors. Whilst Shropshire Link is primarily for residents it is available to visitors, however the pre-booking system can be challenging to casual visitors and requires some research on their part. Examples of the mix of passenger use from the Hadrian's Wall bus were cited where it is evident that there is significant use by locals who are disenfranchised when the service is closed at the end of tourist seasons. The point was made that services deemed to be driven by tourist demand in various parts of the country also have significant ridership by locals.

Issues were raised about the ability of Shropshire Link to provide cross border links into/out of Wales and Cheshire. These are provided where practical and map edges are often "blurred" to provide for residents travel needs.

Funding for services remains a challenge to transport procurers and providers, particularly long term commitments and there is a need to be constantly pro-active. It was suggested that Passenger Focus may consider some research into the availability of information about transport in rural areas.

In all areas there is need for improved communications over the issues and greater understanding, liaison and dialogue between stakeholders is essential. There is general agreement, however, that good and robust bus services in rural areas with integration opportunities put money into local economies as well as providing environmental advantages.

6. Best Practice - An Operator's Perspective – Ben Colson, Norfolk Green

Ben described his bus operations in North and West Norfolk. His mission is to get people out of cars and on to buses and thereby extend the network of

routes by virtue of increased patronage. The company had begun in 1996 with a clean canvass. In the area one major operator and a number of smaller operators existed so Norfolk Green had concentrated on "niche" markets.

Research had been undertaken by anecdotal means, listening to people's needs and monitoring car journeys, thus avoiding the expense of specialist research companies. From the results a set of services were introduced to match the recorded car journeys and consequently offer an alternative mode. Fares were set to undercut motoring costs.

Marketing is specifically targeted at identified segments and much effort is put into engaging with the communities served by Norfolk Green. Free buses are provided for charitable events as a measure of good will and heavy leafleting to community outlets such as pubs, cafes, libraries etc is undertaken to give optimum profile. Additionally an ongoing liaison and dialogue with local and regional media outlets is undertaken to provide a platform for the service to be seen as part of the community.

It has been vital to engage with local authorities not just in transport issues but also in social and economic services. New routes are introduced in partnership with transport authorities under a shared risk agreement.

7. Reconciling Visitor & Resident travel in the Lake District

Alistair Kirkbride, Friends of Lake District & Lake District National Park

In the Lake District a high proportion (c.50%) of public transport usage is by visitors. Research has suggested that visitors and residents have very differing needs from a public transport service. Whilst residents require a frequent and robust service on core routes visitors are prepared to experiment with public transport as something new and novel as part of a holiday experience.

Analysis of journey patterns has revealed a very complex set of demands. A number of different types of service were monitored and they exhibited differing characteristics in the visitor/resident mix.

It is felt that more effort needs to be applied to encourage visitors to use bus services and particularly to attract repeat visitors to them. Points of marketing need to be identified to optimise the attraction of bus use to potential and committed visitors.

The message that public transport is cheaper and more time efficient to visitors in the National Park is being pursued

8. Afternoon Panel Session

The 2 afternoon speakers formed the panel and discussion revolved around issues from their presentations.

Discussion began with the Senior's Bus concession pass scheme. This is unpopular in its present form with operators as it provides inadequate reimbursement. A full bus of seniors loses money despite the subsidy, and is consequently unsustainable. This can ultimately lead to the cessation of unprofitable services resulting in major service gaps. Operators generally believe that the system needs much more examination and research.

Service quality is a major issue and much depends on the attitude of the driver. It is not unreasonable to expect the driver of a late running bus to apologise (as the reasons are usually out of her/his control) but often this doesn't happen. Instances of rudeness and lack of communication are unfortunately common and there is a need for customer care training in some areas. Consistency must be an aspiration. Equally complaints responsiveness of some bus operators leaves much to be desired and let the industry down.

In some tourist areas the message of tourism's importance to the local and regional economy has not got through. Nationally the Regional Development Agency involvement is patchy (although the North West RDA is fairly supportive and pro-active as far as the Lake District National Park is concerned). This reticence is an example of the "not our problem" attitude that seems to be underlying in many public sector agencies and requires correction.

9. Summary

Chris Dale, Chairman TravelWatch North West

Chris summed up the day with a number of points that had emerged from the presentations.

- Funding of Public Transport should be seen as an Investment rather than a Subsidy.
- There is a continued need for revenue funding for public transport.
- Stakeholders need to work with local people and understand their needs.
- Good initiatives rely too much on the energy of dedicated individuals and consequently a national patchwork of rural transport provision exists rather than a consistent network.
- Rural transport remains fragile due to reliance on short term funding and dedication of unpaid volunteers.

Chris called for government and all public sector agencies to re-think their attitudes to public transport in rural areas and to recognise its value to economies and communities.

He thanked the Speakers for their presentations and delegates for their attendance.

Conference concluded at 15.30 hours.