

Poverty & transport event: Summary report

Lairg Community Centre, 25th April 2019

1. Introduction

Transport has a critical role to play in the lives of people experiencing poverty, both in terms of supporting people's ability to increase their incomes and in terms of representing a significant and important cost. It helps to maintain social connections, supports access to essential services, and facilitates access to employment and training opportunities.

Yet too often, people on low incomes are prevented from accessing these opportunities due to affordability and availability issues; something that can both contribute towards and intensify the experience of poverty. For people living in rural areas, transport issues can be even more pronounced and complex, with many communities being under-served by public transport and many individuals, as a result, finding it additionally complex to access the services and opportunities that they need.

Sustrans research, for example, found that over 1 million people in Scotland were living in areas at high risk of 'transport poverty'ⁱ, and Citizens Advice Scotland analysis has shown that people living in rural areas are at increased risk of being excluded from services and opportunities.ⁱⁱ

Every Child, Every Chance: The Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2018 – 2022 recognises the importance of transport in contributing towards targets set by the Child Poverty Act, both through its impact on income and costs. With the Transport Bill having been introduced by the Scottish Government and the National Transport Strategy Review currently underway, this represents an important moment to reflect on how Scotland's transport system can work better for everyone, including people on low incomes living in rural areas, and can contribute towards meeting Scotland's ambitious poverty reduction targets.

2. Background

On 25th April, the Poverty Alliance and HUG (Action for Mental Health), staged an event in Lairg, Sutherland focused on transport and poverty. Supported by the Poverty and

Inequality Commission, the event brought together 40 people to explore the links between transport and poverty in their communities.

Participants were primarily either people with experience of poverty or representatives from community organisations that work with people experiencing poverty. 30 participants were women and 10 were men, with participants living in a range of communities across the Highlands including Fort William; Achiltibuie; Oykel Bridge; Lairg; Ardgay; Embo; Nairn; Ardersier; Golspie; Tongue; Dingwall; Durness; Drumnadrochit; Wick; Castletown; Thurso and Rogart.

Participants were split into 6 groups, with each group having one facilitator. The discussions explored participants' experiences of accessing public transport in Scotland, focusing on questions such as:

- What transport services and supports are currently working well?
- What transport services are not working well, and why?
- What needs to change in order to create a transport system that better meets the needs of people on low incomes and helps to tackle poverty and inequality?

3. What would the ideal transport system look like?

The event began with groups being asked to identify the values and features of the ideal transport system, and to focus in particular on those values and features that would best support people on low incomes. It was suggested that the ideal transport system in Scotland would be:

- **Affordable:** Particularly for groups that are more likely to experience poverty, all cost-related barriers to transport would be removed.
- **Creative:** New and innovative transport methods would be utilised to connect particularly remote and rural communities.

- **Accessible:** Services should operate according to times and routes and in ways that are accessible to every part of every community and that meet everyone's needs.
- **Participative:** People should be able to meaningfully participate in decisions around the provision of transport services in their community.
- **Integrated and connected:** Inequalities in service provision will be addressed, ensuring that every community is properly connected. Alongside this, different methods of transport will be integrated to ensure consistency of service and pricing.
- **People-focused:** Transport services will be entirely focused upon how to meet the needs of everyone in society. The success of services will be measured not in their profitability, but in their ability to ensure that nobody is prevented from travelling to where they need to go for reasons of cost or availability.

4. What works?

At the outset of the discussion, participants were asked to identify and discuss positive aspects of the transport system, and to highlight any aspects that they believed were of particular support to people on low incomes in their communities.

Several groups discussed the importance of community transport schemes to remote and rural communities. These schemes, which provide affordable and accessible connections that enable access to services and employment, were said to be a vital lifeline for many communities. One example cited was Transport for Tongue, a community transport organisation that serves the community of Tongue in the northwest Highlands. Transport for Tongue provides a range of services including door-to-door car services for older people and buses to college for younger people.

Other groups highlighted the support that existing concessionary travel schemes were able to provide. For those with access to the schemes – and who lived in areas that were well-served by public transport – they were said to help people access services and, crucially, help to prevent social isolation and loneliness.

While many remote and rural areas – particularly in the Highlands – are not well-served by the train system, people from those areas that are well-served spoke of the benefits that this brought in terms of increased choice and connections.

Participants with children spoke of how some bus companies that serve their communities provide discounted travel for children, and of the help that this provided in terms of reducing financial pressure on them, particularly during school holidays. It was noted, however, that schemes are not uniform across different transport providers and varied from provider to provider.

5. What isn't working?

After highlighting positive aspects of the transport system, participants were asked to identify which aspects are not currently working well, and what transport-related barriers exist for people on low incomes, particularly those in remote and rural areas.

Discussions broadly centred around three central themes; affordability, availability and accessibility. The key points from the discussions are summarised below:

Affordability

The topic that received the most focus of discussion and which appeared to act as the greatest transport-related barrier for people on low incomes was the cost of transport. A significant number of participants believed that transport services were simply too expensive for people on low incomes and that the cost of transport acted as an unjustifiably high financial burden on them.

For people living in more rural communities, there was an acceptance that travelling for employment may often be required. However, such is the cost of transport in many communities that many participants felt their employment opportunities to be hugely restricted, particularly when the employment on offer was low paid and therefore insufficient to cover the cost of transport. Some participants also reported that the cost of transport was so high that they knew of people in their community who had missed hospital appointments due to being unable to afford the up-front cost of transport, even though they would receive subsequent reimbursement.

It was felt that young people in rural communities were particularly impacted by the high cost of travel, particularly given that they generally have lower incomes due to lower

levels of pay and lower levels of social security entitlements. One participant, for example, spoke of how their son has to pay £17 each day in order to travel to attend college in Inverness; a cost that represented a significant burden for a family already struggling to get by.

There was also a very strong sense from participants that the cost of transport is not consistent across the country, and that people on low incomes who live in rural areas are particularly impacted by inconsistency of pricing between urban and rural areas. This 'rural transport premium' was felt to not only compound the poverty experienced by many, but also to exacerbate inequalities, both between and within communities.

Availability

In addition to issues around the affordability of services, there was also a clear issue around the availability – or rather the lack of availability – of transport services in many rural communities, with one participant stating that even concessionary travel wouldn't help people on low incomes if there were no transport services in their community on which they could travel.

The vast majority of participants discussed how the absence – or infrequency- of transport provision in their community meant that their access to essential services, employment opportunities, educational opportunities and social connections were significantly reduced. Very simply, it was clear that transport services – particularly bus services – were not being planned or delivered in a way that adequately considered when people living on low incomes needed to travel, and where they needed to travel to.

These issues were particularly pronounced at certain periods, for example on Sundays, early in the morning and in evenings. It was said to be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for many people who might work at these times to access transport services at a reasonable cost. Given that many of the people who may be working at these times will be low-paid shift or (particularly in rural areas) seasonal workers – who will be disproportionately reliant upon public transport – it is clear how this can heighten the risk of and compound the poverty that people may experience.

For example, it was stated that – while there are good employment opportunities available in the tourism industry in the Highlands – people can often be prevented from accessing these opportunities due to the absence of any suitable and/or affordable transport provision. One participant told of how, despite there being good employment

opportunities in John O’Groats due to the tourism industry, people in Wick without independent means of transport were prevented from accessing these opportunities due to bus service timetabling that did not meet the needs of workers (particularly at weekends when there are no bus services between the towns at all).

Bus services had been removed in many communities, some participants said, due to small passenger numbers. But no work had been undertaken to understand who those passengers reliant upon those services were, what their needs were, and what the impact would be on them should the service be withdrawn.

It was said that many people – if they wanted to access and/or sustain good employment opportunities, for example – were forced into car ownership as a result of poor local transport provision. The cost of owning a car is significant, but participants spoke of how many people simply have no choice but to bear this cost if they are to access the services and opportunities they need.

There were also examples cited that emphasised the lack of joined-up approaches that exist when it comes to local planning, particularly around housing but also economic development. One participant spoke of how a new low-cost housing development was built in their community, but that there was no suitable transport provision to enable people to travel from the housing development to areas of employment or to access health services. As a result, while people on low incomes may have reduced their housing costs as a result of the development, their transport costs had simultaneously significantly increased.

Finally, it was agreed that, for rural communities, community transport schemes provide a vital lifeline to many people on low incomes. However, it was also flagged as a risk that these schemes are usually dependent upon volunteers and that the organisations delivering the schemes can be at risk from funding challenges, often resulting in ongoing insecurity of provision.

Accessibility

As well as availability and affordability, participants also reported issues in relation to the accessibility of transport services in their area. The poor provision of information relating to transport services was a common feature of discussions, with up-to-date timetabling information being unavailable in many bus shelters, for example. This was a particular problem for people without digital access – a significant proportion of whom can reasonably be presumed to be on low incomes – and led to challenges in people

planning journeys, particularly in more rural areas where services can be extremely infrequent.

Some participants also spoke of how, in their community, regular changes in bus service providers meant that routes and services are highly insecure and prone to regular changes, resulting in people being left without the information they need.

Several disabled participants reported that many rural bus stops and train stations continue to be physically inaccessible and that, while they recognised commitments had been made to improve the physical infrastructure, these commitments had not yet been fully realised in their communities. As a result, they found making journeys even more challenging and, at times, impossible. Given that disabled people are at significantly higher risk of experiencing poverty, such additional challenges make it even less likely that they are able to access the services and opportunities they may need.

6. What needs to change?

After identifying the key problems and challenges that they have experienced with the transport system, participants were asked to suggest and develop ideas to address these problems. Suggestions included:

Free and/or expanded concessionary travel

It was widely agreed that either free or widely expanded concessionary travel was a necessity if the transport system was to truly work for everyone. It was felt that, especially for people living in rural areas, transport was such a necessity that every financial barrier should be removed in order to ensure people can fully access their rights, for example their rights to health, education, adequate living standards and equality.

Some participants believed in the concept of free travel – particularly free bus travel – for all, while others believed more in the concept of radically widening access to concessionary travel, for example for young people and people accessing social security entitlements such as Universal Credit.

Conceptual shift towards transport as a tool for tackling poverty

Less tangibly but arguably most importantly, it was strongly felt that an attitudinal shift towards transport – at a policy-making level - was required; one that moved from

thinking of the transport system merely as a means to transport people and goods, and towards thinking of it as an active tool that can be used to prevent and reduce poverty.

Relatedly, it was strongly felt by participants that transport services should not be delivered for profit and that removing any profit motives from the delivery of services – for example by taking buses and trains into public ownership - would help to ensure that services were more responsive to the needs of everyone in Scotland.

Consistency of pricing

It was strongly felt that rural communities pay a significant premium for transport services – particularly bus services – than people living in urban communities. For people on low incomes, this premium can represent an unmanageable financial burden. There was therefore strong support for greater regulation around pricing structure, to ensure greater equality of pricing across communities in Scotland and to help ease financial pressure on people living on low incomes in rural and remote communities.

Community involvement in transport planning

As a response to the issue of transport services being planned and delivered by people with local knowledge, for example by not running at times required to transport young people to college or by not linking people to areas of employment, there was agreement that there was a need for increased community involvement in transport planning.

Whether through existing bodies such as community councils or other mechanisms, it was agreed that this empowerment of local communities would help to ensure that transport services in local communities would be more responsive to the needs of everyone in those communities.

Greater accountability of transport providers

A common complaint among participants was that, despite the poor transport provision that existed in their area and despite providers often failing to meet the needs of people on low incomes, there were few options available to communities who wished to hold providers accountable. It was felt, therefore, that stronger mechanisms for ensuring accountability were required, for example some form of community-activated 'recall' on contracts awarded to providers who were failing to deliver affordable and accessible services.

Health & equality impact assessments to be conducted for any substantial service changes

Given the disproportionate reliance on public transport of people on low incomes and disabled people, it was suggested that health and equality impact assessments should be undertaken in any situation whereby substantial changes are being made to the transport services on offer to local communities, for example when services on bus routes are withdrawn.

It was felt that too often, the health and equality impacts on the withdrawal or altering of services could be sizeable yet this was not currently captured and not meaningfully considered.



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ⁱ Sustrans (August 2016), *Transport Poverty in Scotland*,

https://www.sustrans.org.uk/sites/default/files/file_content_type/transport_poverty_in_scotland_report.pdf

ⁱⁱ Citizens Advice Scotland (June 2016), *Round the Bend: A review of local bus provision by Scottish Citizens Advice Bureau*, https://www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/round_the_bend_0.pdf