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Poverty and transport event: Summary report

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.

Sustrans research, for example, found that over 1 million people in Scotland were living in areas at high risk of transport povertyⁱ, and recent analysis undertaken by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation concluded that people living in low-income neighbourhoods in Scotland find their employment opportunities limited by unaffordable or unreliable public transport.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 better support people on low incomes and can contribute towards meeting Scotland's ambitious poverty reduction targets.

2. Background

On 6th February 2019, the Poverty Alliance and Oxfam Scotland staged an event in Glasgow focused on transport and poverty. Supported by the Poverty and Inequality Commission, the event brought together 40 people, the vast majority of whom have direct experience of poverty. Attendees were primarily either members of the Poverty Alliance's Community Activist Advisory Group (CAAG) or were participants in Oxfam Scotland's Future Skills project. 30 participants were women and 10 were men.



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While demographic data was not collected, it was evident from the content of discussions and from previous experience with the participants involved that a significant proportion:

- Had at least one disability;
- Spoke English as a second language;
- Lived in urban west or central Scotland.

Participants were split into 6 groups, with each group either facilitated by a member of staff from the Poverty Alliance or Oxfam, or by a member of the CAAG with experience of facilitation. 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 supports 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. Suggestions for the values that would be embodied by the ideal transport system included:

- **Affordability:** Particularly for groups that are more likely to experience poverty, all cost-related barriers to transport would be removed.
- **Accountability:** The system should be accountable, with people and communities being able to influence the delivery of services and with providers being required to properly and publicly account for the quality of services.



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- **Accessibility:** 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.
- **Integrated and connected:** Services – across all modes of public transport – will be delivered in a joined-up way that properly considers the type of journeys people take.
- **Rights-based:** Transport will be considered a right, and transport services will be delivered in such a way as to recognise their importance in supporting people to exercise other social and economic rights.
- **People-focused:** Transport services will be entirely focused upon how to meet the needs of everyone in society, rather than any focus on profitability.

4. What works?

At the outset of the substantive 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.

Several groups spoke of the help that existing concessionary travel schemes provide. It was stated that these schemes provide a vital form of support, particularly for disabled people, and can help to combat the social isolation, loneliness and lack of confidence that people with disabilities can often experience. The schemes were also said to be essential in ensuring that people are able to access the essential services that they require such as health services, social security services and education.

Other positive factors that were highlighted largely centred around other supports that are available for disabled people. One participant highlighted the Thistle Assistance Card, developed by the South East of Scotland Transport Partnership. A credit card-sized card, it advises drivers or conductors – in a discrete way - of the particular support or assistance that a disabled person needs, thus making transport easier to access. Another participant spoke of the impact that an Access to Work Grant had made to them, by funding their travel costs to and from their workplace; thus enabling them to sustain employment in a way they had previously been unable to do.



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It was agreed that, given that disabled people are proportionately more likely to experience poverty than non-disabled people, anything that removes disability-related barriers to transport is an important component in ensuring the transport system better supports people on low incomes.

Other positive features of the transport system that were highlighted included:

- MyBus bookable bus services, which are delivered by Strathclyde Partnership for Transport and which provide door-to-door transport in a number of areas across the west of Scotland. These services were said to provide a more flexible and accessible service that can particularly meet the needs of disabled people.
- Summer holiday ticketing discount schemes, provided by a number of bus companies, which some participants said had helped to hugely reduce the cost of travel for her family. It was noted, however, that these offers are not well-publicised (e.g. the vast majority of participants were not aware of such schemes).

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. 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 reflected that transport, and especially bus services, were simply too expensive for people on low incomes. Particularly for families with children, transport can exert significant pressure on household budgets and limit the opportunities and options available.

For people seeking employment, the cost of transport was said to represent a major consideration when assessing possible employment options, with it limiting the scope of realistic and feasible employment options. For people in low-paid employment, the cost of transport was said to often represent a significant proportion of their expenditure and



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contributed towards a further entrenchment of the in-work poverty they may be experiencing.

One person spoke of how the cost of transport acted as a barrier to their children being able to regularly participate in after-school or extra-curricular activities, something which could have a detrimental impact upon educational attainment and social connections.

School holidays were said by participants to be a particularly challenging time, with there being a greater need to rely upon public transport when their children are not in school. While some bus companies were reported to provide discounted ticketing schemes for families during the school summer holidays, there was very low awareness of these schemes among participants and they were limited to only a small number of bus companies. They were also said to not be available during non-summer school holidays.

Some participants spoke of how a discounted travel scheme is available for people claiming JobSeekers Allowance or Universal Credit. However, there appeared to be extremely low awareness of this among other participants as well as a perception that JobCentre Plus staff were either also unaware of the scheme or did not promote the scheme as standard practice. One participant, who is in receipt of Universal Credit, said that while they are aware of the discounted travel scheme and eligible for it, they have never felt able or confident enough to ask their Job Coach for access to it out of fear that doing so may in some way jeopardise or reduce their Universal Credit entitlement.

One participant, who had been through the asylum process, spoke of the difficulties that asylum seekers can experience when seeking to access transport, given the extremely low level of financial support that they receive from the Home Office.

Finally, a lack of integrated ticketing systems – and the fragmented nature of the bus service provision available in many areas - was said to often further increase the cost of bus travel for many people. With different bus companies operating across the same area, some participants spoke of having to take multiple buses (operated by multiple companies) to make one journey. This means purchasing multiple tickets and therefore substantially increasing the cost the journey.

Availability

Many participants spoke of the absence, or lack, of public transport in their community, with discussion primarily focusing around the fragmented nature of bus service



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provision and of how this fragmentation results in the needs of people on low incomes often not being met.

There was discussion, for example, of how in some areas with high levels of poverty, there were no buses to major supermarkets. As a result, people are often forced into shopping at more expensive shops that are easier to access by foot or other means; something that represents the ‘poverty premium’ in action. A lack of bus service provision in these areas also impacts, it was said, people’s ability to access essential services like health, education, training and social security. This can have a huge impact on people’s lives, reinforcing social isolation as well as preventing people from being able to exercise their rights.

For example, one participant told of how the timing of bus services from their village to the local college (in the nearest large town) meant that young people attending the college were forced to wait several hours in the town each evening for their return bus home or were forced to pay large amounts of money for taxis. Another participant with experience of the asylum process highlighted the particular challenges for asylum seekers. With asylum accommodation largely being located in areas that are not well-served by public transport, people are often left isolated and unable to access the services that they require. For people who have often experienced significant trauma and who may need particular support, this can be hugely problematic.

Bus service provision was said to be especially poor in many areas – particularly rural areas - early in the morning, in evenings and at night-time. This is something that has a particular impact on shift workers, who are often low paid and already disproportionately reliant upon public transport.

A number of women spoke of how poor public transport provision has often served to exacerbate the challenges they already face in trying to balance childcare and employment. One participant told of the difficulties she had faced in sustaining her low-paid employment while also travelling to and from nursery to drop off and pick up her children. Being dependent upon unreliable, irregular and expensive bus services meant that this represented a major cause of worry and anxiety.

Finally, punctuality – particularly of bus services – was spoken about by several groups as being a major issue. For participants in employment, late running buses often meant they were late for work which in turn led to a loss of wages. With no delay repay compensation being available via bus companies, participants spoke of the impact this had often had on their (already low) incomes. Other participants spoke of how late



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running buses had caused them to be late for JobCentre Plus appointments. While none had reported being sanctioned as a result, they spoke of the anxiety and fear that this had caused.

Accessibility

In addition to affordability and availability, participants also discussed issues related to the accessibility of transport services. The provision of information related to bus services, for example, was said to be extremely poor. With multiple bus companies operating in the same areas and often on the same routes, it can be difficult for many people to access the information – particularly around pricing – that they need in order to make decisions about or plan their journeys in an affordable way. Some participants who speak English as a second language told of the particular challenges they faced when trying to obtain accessible information about transport in their community.

The physical infrastructure of some forms of transport, particularly buses, was also said to represent a barrier for people. A number of women with young children spoke of the lack of space for prams on many buses. Some women said that this made travelling by bus an anxious experience, while others said that they had simply been unable to travel on some occasions due to a lack of space on the bus.

Other issues

In addition to those issues related to affordability, availability and accessibility, several other issues were raised by participants. These included:

- **Stigmatising attitudes:** Some participants with concessionary travel passes had experienced what they perceived to be stigmatising attitudes and behaviours from staff, particularly bus drivers. One participant spoke of being made to show his concessionary pass multiple times to the same driver, something that had made them feel embarrassed and ashamed.
- **Discriminatory attitudes:** Some participants from BME communities and participants who speak English as a second language reported experiencing discriminatory attitudes from staff, which had made them less inclined to access public transport as a result.



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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

With affordability of transport being the dominant theme of most discussions, it was proposed by a number of groups that there was a need – and a clear justification for – free and/or expanded concessionary travel for certain groups.

Young people were said to be in particular need of this, especially given the lower rates of pay that many receive because of the tiered approach to the National Minimum Wage. It was agreed that people on low incomes (both in and out of work) – for example anyone with a Universal Credit entitlement - should receive free and/or concessionary travel, as a means of ensuring they are able to access all the services they need and are not excluded from employment, training and educational opportunities.

People with insecure immigration status were also said to be in need of free and/or concessionary travel, given that they are at heightened risk of experiencing poverty and/or destitution and often require access to services that are not easily accessible from areas in which they are living.

Transport subsidies for training and education

Travel grants for people accessing training and education were proposed as another means of ensuring that the transport system is as affordable as possible for people on low incomes. Such a grant could be administered via local authorities or via education and training providers.

Better training of staff

Given concerns about stigmatising or discriminatory attitudes that may exist among some staff working in the transport system – particularly to groups who are disproportionately more likely to experience poverty, such as disabled people and people from BME communities – improved training practices was felt to be important.



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Training on poverty awareness as well as equalities and diversity training were proposed as mandatory components of any induction process for staff working for travel providers, particularly those working in public-facing roles.

Integrated ticketing systems

A repeated complaint during discussions was that the fragmented nature of many journeys (e.g. having to take a number of buses – often using different bus companies – to complete one journey) led to increased costs which people on low incomes find difficult to manage. A fully integrated ticketing system was therefore agreed to be important in terms of addressing both affordability and accessibility.

One caveat to this proposal was that, while there is a need to integrate ticketing systems, this has to be done in a way that is mindful to the realities of people on low incomes. For example, while many passengers may find the introduction of contactless card payments to be a positive development, other people (who may not have access to a bank account) may face additional barriers if (as in other areas in the UK) the system moves to a card-only approach.

Consistency of pricing

A common issue, particularly around bus services, was the disparities in pricing that exist between different bus companies and across different geographical areas. Participants therefore supported increased regulation to ensure consistent and easy to understand pricing structures that did not disadvantage, for example, people living in rural areas who are often forced to pay significantly more for journeys than people living in more urban areas.

Increased accountability and community involvement in transport planning

A number of participants believed in the need for greater community involvement in the planning and delivery of transport services. With local transport decision-making processes often seeming unclear to community members, it was agreed that a more participative approach to identifying and addressing gaps in local transport provision was essential if the transport system was to be made truly responsive to the needs of local communities.



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Allied to this, participants agreed there was a need to strengthen and open up complaint and feedback processes to ensure greater accountability of providers when services were not meeting the needs of people and communities.

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 Joseph Rowntree Foundation (August 2018), *Tackling transport-related barriers to work in Scotland*,

<https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/tackling-transport-related-barriers-employment-low-income-neighbourhoods>



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