



The Rural Services Network

# National Rural Conference 2024

Delivering for Rural - Unlocking rural prosperity

Thursday 19th September

**Rural Transport Session**

## AI GENERATED SUMMARY OF THE SESSION

### **Rural Transport Session Introduction**

Kerry Booth, Chief Executive of the Rural Services Network, welcomed participants to the Rural Transport session of the National Rural Conference and thanked the conference supporters and sponsors. Kerry gave an overview of the RSN's work on fair funding and the need for targeted rural policy, highlighting challenges faced by rural communities such as the cessation of bus routes and urban councils having more government-funded spending power. Kerry emphasized the need for a mix of solutions for rural areas and the importance rural transport provision.

### **Transport for the North Discussion**

Dr Tom Jarvis, Senior Evidence and Analysis Officer for Transport for the North discussed transport and social exclusion in rural communities, noting that poor active travel conditions, inadequate public transport, and high levels of car dependency are common factors contributing to exclusion. He also introduced a data model developed by Transport for the North to better understand and address the issue of transport-related social exclusion. The conversation ended with Tom discussing the need for policy changes to address transport-related social exclusion in rural areas, suggesting practical steps for transport planners and strategists. The participants discussed the challenges and best practices in rural bus service delivery, emphasizing the importance of coordinating bus services with other forms of transport.

### **Rural Bus Service Challenges and Best Practices**

Richard Stevens, Managing Director of Plymouth City Bus and Go Cornwall Bus, shared his experience and background in the industry, praising the courage of local authorities in managing bus services. The company, which was owned by Plymouth City Council until 2009, expanded into Cornwall and secured a contract with Cornwall Council in 2019, promising to bring greater public control to the bus network. The speaker noted the challenges faced by local bus services, including the decline in bus mileage and the shift in funding from subsidy to the passenger. Despite these challenges, the contract has seen an increase in bus mileage. Richard discussed the challenges of operating in a single-track road area with no diversionary routes and the reliance on travel to education. He highlighted the comprehensive nature of their bus network, which is largely reliable and punctual, and the successful introduction of an all-operator interoperability ticketing scheme. However, he expressed concern about the viability of rural bus services due to the £2 fare cap, which has made the funding of services more

challenging. Richard also addressed the issue of accessibility for people with disabilities, stating that they have a policy to pay for a taxi if a wheelchair user cannot board a bus within 30 minutes. He also mentioned the introduction of electric buses in Cornwall, with 6 of them being operated in partnership with Plymouth and Cornwall Councils.

### **Rural Transportation Funding**

Carole Barr from ACT Cumbria raised concerns about the affordability of bus fares for rural residents, and the potential complications of implementing a concessionary rate. Richard from Go Cornwall Bus highlighted the importance of equitable and integrated funding across different modes of transport and improving data to better illustrate rural transport challenges. Cllr Richard Cox from Lichfield emphasized the importance of funding in determining the quality of rural transportation services and expressed concerns about the lack of joined-up thinking in transport policy, emphasizing the need for innovative solutions to encourage public transport use and reduce reliance on cars. Graham Biggs, Rural Policy Advisor for the RSN expressed frustration with the current funding model and suggested a place-based approach could be more effective.

### **The Future of Rural Buses**

Unfortunately, due to technical issues, the third speaker Stephen Goss from the Campaign for Better Transport, was unable to present at the session. Kerry Booth shared Stephen's presentation in his absence and highlighted the financial constraints faced by companies and the need for a proper rural transport policy. The Buses Bill was discussed which aims to devolve bus services and provide greater flexibility over bus funding. Discussion emphasized the importance of buses as a public service and called for a minimum level of bus service provision for all communities, a long-term funding settlement for councils, and a review of the funding formula to address the unfair allocation of funds to rural areas.

### **Community Transport in Rural Areas Discussion**

Kerry initiated a discussion about the role of community transport in rural areas, inviting Nick Mills, Research and Insight Manager for the Community Transport Association to share his insights. Nick highlighted the common themes in their research, including long-term funding for transport, social prescribing, electric vehicle take-up, and accessibility of vehicles. He also mentioned the importance of connecting health and education with transport. Cllr John Toye from North Norfolk then proposed the idea of intermodal transport, where people travel a few miles by car and then use a bus or bike for the rest of the journey. Richard from Go Cornwall Bus suggested the idea of community parking hubs, which could serve as car-sharing points, bus stops, and community batteries. Both Nick and Richard agreed on the need for community asset-based hubs in rural settings.

### **Improving Rural Transport Solutions and Connectivity**

The discussion revolved around the need for improved transport solutions in rural areas, with a focus on addressing the challenges faced by these regions. The participants agreed that a rural-focused solution is necessary, rather than assuming that urban solutions are applicable. They also discussed the importance of gathering evidence to justify government investment in rural transport options, emphasizing the need to prove the economic value and improved health and wellbeing that such investments could generate. The idea of creating multi-user hubs, combining transport, electric vehicle charging points, healthcare services, and libraries, was also proposed as a potential solution. The participants also highlighted the need for a more integrated transport system that connects rural areas to urban centres.

### **Integrating Social Value, International Comparisons in Transport and AI**

Cllr Richard Stobart from South Cambridgeshire proposed exploring the concept of a post bus service, which integrates community transport with other services, and the use of social value engines to justify rural transport investments. The idea of using electric vehicles for post buses was also discussed. The discussion revolved around the need to integrate social value into assessments of transport investment and the potential for a transferable model from the Welsh

government's reforms. The participants also discussed the importance of international comparisons, particularly with Switzerland, Austria, and Germany, to understand the transport experiences of rural residents in England. Cllr Trevor Roach from the Forest of Dean raised concerns about car ownership addiction and the need to break it, as well as the potential of new technologies and renewable energies. He also suggested looking at how other countries, such as Ghana, run their mass transit systems in rural areas. The idea of using mobile phones and algorithms to guide local transport systems was also proposed. Cllr Trevor Roach also touched on the topic of AI and its potential impact. Others contributed to debate on the potential of autonomous vehicles and the importance of spatial planning in rural areas.

### **Next Steps**

1. Rural Services Network to explore organizing targeted sessions on the social value engine for members.
2. Rural Services Network to work with the All-Party Parliamentary Group on rural services priorities, including rural transport.