

RURAL ACCESSIBILITY: A BUS, A MAN, A VAN AND A SOFA!

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1. INTRODUCTION

Rural residents are frequently more isolated from services than their urban counterparts due, at least in part, to the more dispersed nature of services and less frequent provision of public transport. As such, authorities with jurisdiction over rural areas are required to be more innovative and 'think outside the box' when it comes to developing ways in which they can increase access for their rural residents to a range of goods, services and activities.

This research is the third in a series of three reports produced for the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) and draws upon the two previous reports as listed below:

- A think-piece entitled 'Sustainable Rural Accessibility: Is it really possible?' (ITP, 2008a)
- A Review of Rural Accessibility Strategies (ITP, 2008b).

The first of these reports identified potential for sustainable rural accessibility but also found that there were some issues associated with delivery. The second report went on to examine what these issues might be, and was based predominantly on interviews with local authority officers. The findings from the second report reinforced the think-piece and identified significant potential to improve rural accessibility using accessibility planning, which involves a combination of transport based measures and non-transport solutions. It is particularly important to bear in mind that accessibility is about more than just moving people, and sometimes it is better to move or change services to meet their needs. Therefore, the third piece of research culminated in the production of ten case studies, which illustrated a range of schemes in rural areas that were having an impact on accessibility for local people. This paper is based on the case studies.

In terms of structure, this paper firstly provides an overview of the method used to select the schemes included in the case studies, before providing a brief summary of each of the case studies undertaken. It then discusses the lessons learnt across each of the schemes, before finally drawing some conclusions pertaining to rural accessibility.

2. METHOD

The first stage of the research was to identify which ten case studies would be included. The strategy for selection was based on the accessibility planning criteria included in the Department for Transport (DfT) accessibility planning guidance (DfT, 2006). These criteria are:

- Improving transport availability;
- Reducing the cost of travel;
- Reducing the need to travel;
- Improving physical accessibility;
- Improving the provision for cycling and walking;

- ❑ Improving travel information and awareness;
- ❑ Coordinating the timing of services;
- ❑ Improving accessibility through demand management measures; and
- ❑ Addressing crime and the fear of crime.

During the process, a number of other factors were considered including:

- ❑ the date of scheme commencement;
- ❑ breadth of schemes selected;
- ❑ access to service type; and
- ❑ demand and supply schemes.

In conjunction with scheme selection, a proforma was developed to give structure to the site visits. It was acknowledged at an early stage that due to the wide range of differences between the schemes, it would be difficult to apply exactly the same questions to all the schemes. As such the proforma was used as a topic guide during each site visit.

Each site visit took a day, and where the scheme was visible (for example a bus route) it incorporated some time spent observing or using the service. In addition at least two people were interviewed during each visit to generate a balanced perspective about the scheme.

The case studies were written up into the proforma to ensure they had a uniform appearance and contained similar basic facts regarding scheme delivery and operation.

3. THE CASE STUDIES

This section provides an overview of each of the case studies, predominantly detailing what the problem was that led to the implementation of the scheme, some information about the scheme itself and the lessons learnt from the scheme. The full case studies are available on the CRC website.¹

3.1 Leicestershire DRT services and the Rural Rider

Leicestershire has some very rural areas served by small market towns. This presents some significant problems in terms of the provision of public transport to provide access to the residents of these areas.

Following a best value review of services in Leicestershire, some changes were made to rural transport provision within the county. The changes were heavily focussed on providing the best possible service for rural residents within the constraints of a rural area and transport budgets. Two outcomes from this review were covered in the case studies, a taxi based DRT system and a redesigned rural bus network.

The DRT services that operate in rural Leicestershire were first implemented in 2003. They are used to fill gaps in the rural transport network where a conventional local bus service is not a feasible option. Often a DRT scheme is implemented in an area when a conventional bus service has been withdrawn, either by the operator or the local authority.

The taxi based DRT schemes within the county operate on either a fully demand responsive basis (the minority) or a semi fixed route basis, both of which require pre booking. They are designed in this way to serve a small number of closely located villages in the most efficient way possible. Passengers wishing to travel on the DRT scheme need to book by 5pm the day before they wish to travel, However last minute bookings are acceptable (at the discretion of the taxi company) if the journey already has bookings and would therefore be running in any event. The fares on the services are in line with those on the local bus services that were cancelled, and fare increases are implemented in line with fare increases on the rest of the bus network.

The Rural Rider bus network was set up in 2006 and operates in east Leicestershire, which is a very rural area with a number of small market towns. The Rural Rider service forms a network of bus services that link the villages in east Leicestershire with the larger market towns of Oakham, Hungarton, Tilton on the Hill, Hallerton, Market Harborough, Great Easton, Melton Mowbray and the city of Leicester. Some settlements on the network are served by more than one service, although many of the services do not operate daily. The network was introduced after in-depth consultation with residents in all the areas affected. This was particularly necessary because Leicestershire County Council (LCC) wanted to remove all the existing services so that they could replace them with a network of new services that better met the needs of the population and would be branded Rural Rider.

Overall those involved with the project at LCC felt that the way they had undertaken the review of public transport and developed bespoke solutions had enabled them to provide a comprehensive (for a rural area) public transport network that served the needs of the local population. This allows the residents of many of the villages a choice of destinations and access to a wide range of services. The network has been well received by local people and the feedback received from passengers was very good. Many felt that the services offered them the opportunity to remain independent without the need for a car.

One remaining issue related to the DRT services that may cause some minor problems in the future is the potential level of administrative work by LCC needed to run the schemes, including the support given to the taxi drivers who are frequently unused to having to undertake the necessary level of administration for their services.

By taking this approach, 76% of rural residents now have access to an hourly or better bus service, an improvement from 55% in 2001.

3.2 The Pendle Witch Hopper - Lancashire

The Pendle Witch Hopper is a bus service that operates from Clitheroe to Nelson in Lancashire, serving some of the villages between the two and connecting with the train to and from Manchester at Clitheroe Interchange. Most of the bus route sits within the borough of Pendle, with only Clitheroe outside. Pendle is in the east of Lancashire about 25 miles north of Manchester. The bus service began operating in 2008, and is a modified reiteration of a poorly performing rural bus service that was funded through the Rural Bus Challenge (RBC). Remaining RBC monies were used to modify, re-launch and support the new service, which does not have the demand responsive elements of its predecessor, but does connect with other bus and rail services in the local area.

Lancashire County Council is, thus far, pleased with the performance of the service. Although they acknowledged that the service provided is not as comprehensive as it was previously, patronage levels are good and the service is providing what was intended. It is especially positive that the interchanges between the services work so well. However having so many interchanges does have some downsides. For example, it is very complicated to make changes to the timetable due to the impact this has on the other services. In addition the county council

have found it difficult to build a relationship with the train company to facilitate the connection to the train.

However the links between the services were proving popular with tourists who were visiting the area, especially local walkers. An indirect social benefit of the service occurred with the formation of a rambling group comprising individual people who had begun using the bus to access the local countryside and go for walks. Through the provision of the bus service, they had come into contact with each other and formed the group.

3.3 Access4Life - Norfolk

The Access4Life project was set up by Norfolk County Council (NCC) as a way of implementing their Accessibility Strategy. The overall aim of the project is to work in partnership to identify areas where service accessibility is a problem, and deliver improvements to tackle those problems. There are two main strands to the project: the development of a partnership working within the county; and engaging the community to identify problems and develop solutions. Access4Life is one of the vehicles through which NCC are delivering their Accessibility Strategy. It began in 2006 with the commencement of the 2nd Local Transport Plan delivery and is ongoing.

The project initially consisted of two pilot areas (part funded through the County Strategic Partnership), which were deemed so successful that further funding was sought to extend the project to deliver accessibility improvements in the remaining Accessibility Action areas. Accessibility Action Area Three is now being delivered and a variety of projects have been supported.

For example, Services2Gether was a feasibility study exploring the potential of multi-provider mobile service delivery as a means of addressing service access issues. In another area of the county, it was identified that two community transport organisations operating in the area were both offering services to the same market town on the same day. This was also the day when the local doctor's surgery ran an outreach clinic in the community. By bringing the providers together, Access4Life was able to get them to coordinate delivery and provide more transport opportunities for residents. Finally in the current delivery area, the partners are working with local community transport providers to offer people transport to a community shop that has recently opened. Other communities in the area would have liked their own community shop, however it is thought to be more efficient to develop one sustainable community shop and transport people to it rather than have lots of less sustainable community shops

One of the most important lessons that the project team have learnt is that a working partnership is a very successful way to deliver valuable improvements to accessibility. However they note that developing such partnerships is hard work and involves persistence and good communication. Finally they found that, when developing the partnership to act as the steering group for a project such as Access4Life, it is important to have the right people sitting on the partnership. The people need to be decision makers who are passionate about the project and committed to helping change the situation.

3.4 Rural Access Points – North Yorkshire

The Rural Access Points are situated in Craven District, the most westerly district of North Yorkshire. Three quarters of the district is situated within the Yorkshire Dales National Park and the population density is amongst the lowest in England, with only 0.44 persons per hectare. The aim of the Rural Access points project was to identify barriers to service access and implement

effective solutions so that residents in isolated rural areas can access education and other community based services.

An important part of this project right from the beginning was the development of recognition that variation exists across areas and solutions need to be tailored to this. Three rural access points were established in schools across the area. They provide a meeting point, with comfortable seating (a sofa!), for community members and community workers. Through this, community members can access a wide range of opportunities and information, including learning opportunities.

The project has been deemed a success, providing a number of learning opportunities for local residents. It was thought that a key contribution to the success of the project was the 'touchy feely' research that was undertaken as part of the project and is ongoing through the rural access points that have now been established. This is because the target population for the delivery of education are not easily contactable through more traditional means of advertising.

From a rural accessibility perspective, the project provides a good example of partnership working between a variety of different agencies to deliver a project that appears to have a sustainable future. There is a further benefit of the project to the environment. By delivering the courses locally the project is inherently reducing the need for people to travel potentially long distances to access education.

3.5 North Dorset Trailway - Dorset

The North Dorset Trailway is a public right of way open to walkers, cyclists and horse riders. It is situated to the north of the county of Dorset, a sparsely populated area, where the majority of the population is aged between 25 and 54. The aim of the North Dorset Trailway is to connect the settlements along the old railway line providing access to services and activities, as well as leisure for walkers, cyclists and horse riders that is safe and off road.

Work began on the trailway concept in 1996 and has been ongoing as various elements of the trailway have been developed over time. The development of the trailway has involved significant negotiation by the project officer with landowners and funding organisations but the benefits of this have come to fruition, as evidenced by the Fiddleford Bridge, which provides an essential link on the trailway, and was part financed through Dorset County Council Local Transport Plan capital funding.

The trailway is now providing a link between rural settlements with a variety of services. The team involved in the construction of the trailway are very pleased with the levels of usage observed so far, but appreciate that there is a lot of work still to be done before the whole length of the trailway is opened. The key factors that have contributed to the successes observed so far have been the assistance of the landowners and the support from the local communities. This has been demonstrated through volunteer help, Parish and Village Plans, a trailway petition and the public support for the grand opening.

3.6 Mobile Gateway - Kent

The aim of the Gateway project is to improve access to council (at both county and district levels) services within Kent. It also aims to make better use of the human and property resources within Kent County Council (KCC). The project consists of a number of static hubs accompanied by one mobile hub which takes services out to more rural areas within the county.

The aim of the mobile Gateway is to serve the more sparsely populated areas within the county. KCC is the largest non-metropolitan local authority area in the UK in terms of resident population and contains a number of large towns. However vast amounts of the county are rural and some of these areas have limited access to services and facilities. The areas that the mobile gateway serve are informed by mapping undertaken using data from the MOSAIC and Origin classifications. The services provided are variable and depend on the area, so far they have included health checks and district council services.

Overall KCC is pleased with the way that the project has been working and the outcomes that have been observed. However some issues have been encountered during the process. The first of these was problems stabilising the trailer on uneven surfaces and manoeuvring it in a limited area. Research undertaken by the project team has suggested that there would be a minimal cost difference between building a trailer and building a vehicle based on a HGV. Due to the issues encountered, in the future KCC would definitely choose a HGV or bus based vehicle rather than another trailer.

Secondly it has proved somewhat difficult to measure the success of the mobile Gateway in rural areas. This is because the vehicle is visited by fewer people in rural areas, which could be interpreted as it being 'less of a success'. However the project team are trying to ensure that they report more than just numbers and feel that it is important that any performance monitoring that is undertaken takes into account the impact on the lives of the people who make use of the service and the potential cost savings created elsewhere both within the authority and for other service providers.

3.7 Access to Fresh Food – Selby

The Selby District Access to Fresh Food Project operates in the district of Selby. The population density within the district is well below the national and regional averages with only 1.28 persons per hectare. The access to fresh food project was set up with the aim of increasing access to fresh food, alongside the provision of information regarding how to cook and store them for vulnerable groups in Selby district. These groups were defined as children and older people.

The access to fresh food project has been undertaken with the help of various partner organisations, for example children's centres, through which some of the vegetables are distributed, and the local community transport scheme, which delivers both the vegetables and the volunteers who help with the scheme.

By building demand for the service during the pilot the project has demonstrated that there is a need for the service in Selby District. In addition this is helping to establish the project sustainably by building in elements of the project slowly. The next stage of the project is to begin growing the vegetables on site and continue to build relationships with the other growers locally with a view to using their waste products (for example vegetables that do not meet the required standards of the supermarkets in terms of shape or size).

The project has built strong links with local partners who are helping to deliver and develop the project. In the future the project will involve local people more heavily who will, over time, take over the running of the project.

3.8 Thornford Station Access - Dorset

Thornford Station is located in West Dorset approximately a mile outside of the village of Thornford, and a mile from the hamlet of Beer Hackett. The population of the two settlements is

920, with the majority living in Thornford. About 60% of the residents of working age are employed and car ownership levels in the settlements are higher than the national average.

Prior to the project, residents from the village were unable to access the station safely due to a lack of footways. In addition there was no easily accessible parking, preventing pick up and drop off at the station and use of the station by local residents who wanted to arrive by car.

The project has enhanced access to Thornford station by providing parking and a suitable and safe drop off point for people. The construction of the footpath from the parking area towards the station removed the need to walk directly on the busiest part of the route from the village to the station making it much more accessible, especially taking into account that the route is unlit by streetlights.

The project achieved first place at the National Association of Community Rail Partnerships (ACORP) annual awards in the Local Transport Integration category beating competition from large scale transport interchanges in Scotland and Wales. The award judges commented that 'this was a great project, with local people looking at a problem and acting with partners to reduce obstacles to access'. A recent passenger count identified an increase in passengers using Thornford Station of about 35% between 2007 and 2009.

All of the key partners in the project (DCC, Heart of Wessex Community Rail Partnership, Thornhackett Parish Council) are very pleased with the outcomes of the project and positive about the working relationships between all parties. They are glad that their efforts were recognised at the ACORP annual awards and felt that schemes similar to Thornford can have valuable benefits for rural communities and help to sustain rail services to rural stations.

3.9 First Contact - Lincolnshire

The First Contact project is based on a model used in the Rushcliffe borough in Nottinghamshire. It was introduced following the Local Area Agreement (LAA) Sure Start approach and aims to: encourage agencies to work together; help the over 60s navigate public and charitable services; prevent agencies duplicating work; help the over 60s receive the services they may be entitled to; and work preventatively rather than reactively (to help people remain independent).

The First Contact project runs in partnership with: Lincolnshire Fire and Rescue; District Council housing teams; Adult Social Care; Lincolnshire Energy Efficiency; Age Concern; Lincolnshire Police; Local Pensions Service; LCC Accessibility and Policy Unit; Local Voluntary Sector Hubs; and Share the Care. The partners have worked together to create a simple form containing 11 questions (one for each of the partner organisations). These are used to ascertain if the respondent requires more help or information on the services provided by any of the agencies. In addition the form asks for information regarding tenancy, and has a referral agreement for the respondent to sign. The form can be filled in by the older person, or by a friend or relative who can be contacted on their behalf.

A separate form has also been produced for partner agencies to fill in if they encounter an older person. This works on the basis that whichever agency comes into contact with the older person first is trained to fill in the form on the older person's behalf. This form contains the same question and in addition has a comments box next to each question so that any useful information can be added alongside the response. This form was produced because it was identified that agencies who come into contact with older people often receive information about problems outside of their responsibilities. Trying to signpost the older person, particularly when involving more than one agency, can be time consuming.

LCC have been pleased overall with the project and have found that being open minded during its introduction has enabled them to make changes to elements of the project during its development. This means that the resultant resources have been subject to ongoing testing and as such reflect the demands of the area and its residents. There are some issues on the horizon, including the fact that more agencies now want to be involved with the project and there are some concerns associated with expanding the number of questions on the form.

4. LESSONS LEARNT

The best practice case studies illustrate the wide variety of ways in which local authorities have been delivering improved accessibility for their rural residents.

This section provides a brief overview of the key themes across the case studies It will look firstly at the role of consultation, followed by the function of partnerships. It will then review funding and finance for the schemes before looking at innovation, flexibility and finally other issues. It must be noted that all of the schemes are still evolving and therefore these findings may change over time.

4.1 Consultation

The importance of consultation within many of the schemes came across strongly during the best practice research. It became apparent that in-depth and innovative consultation exercises had been undertaken in many cases. The interviewees were all very positive about the role of the consultation process and its effectiveness as a means of informing the design of any solutions they were planning. However one of the key factors that came up repeatedly was the need to be honest with consultees about the situation, for example to explicitly state that a bus service would be removed. This eradicates any doubt surrounding the situation and enables the consultees to focus on coming up with a workable solution rather than trying to save something that has been deemed unsustainable or ineffectual.

In addition it was identified that if the function of the consultation was to inform the design of the solution to the problem, then the authority should begin with as few pre-conceived ideas about the scheme as possible. This helps to allay the typical response of consultees that a decision has already been made about the future actions and the authority are only paying lip-service to the consultation process because they are obliged to do so.

Finally it was noted that undertaking in-depth consultation in this way is very time consuming and can be human resource heavy. One example cited was that using parish magazines to contact people during consultations proved fruitful. However fitting around their deadlines often meant that the consultation process took longer than expected. Obviously the key to success is managing the consultation process well and realising that consultation can be time consuming, but not letting this get out of hand to the detriment of the project.

4.2 Partnerships

Partnership working is a key aspect of accessibility planning and was explained as such within the DfT guidance. The case studies described a wide variety of partnerships that have been generated as a result of accessibility planning. They also revealed a number of lessons that have been learnt through the process of building and working in partnership.

One of the main lessons identified was that being involved in partnerships and working properly with partners is very time consuming. Arranging meetings for a large group of partners to attend may mean that meetings have to be organised a long way in advance making it difficult to deal with project problems as they arise. This is linked to the need for an overall partnership leader to

facilitate decision making and follow-up on the elements of work that partners have agreed to undertake.

Finally partners need to be carefully selected for the project in question. They need to be passionate about it and be able to bring some value to it, whether that is through offering time, money, or decision making capabilities within their organisation. The schemes included in the review involved partners in a wide range of activities, from problem analysis to project development and delivery. The role of partners on all of these occasions was positive.

4.3 Innovation

One of the aims of this best practice review, alongside providing examples of best practice was to cover schemes with an element of innovation. The schemes included in the review were 'innovative' in a range of ways. The Rural Rider case study, for example, shows how taking a network approach to revising public transport in a rural area can have a positive impact on the quality of service provision. First Contact in Lincolnshire offers an example of how a strong partnership can be built that increases access to a wide range of services through the provision of information while the Thornford Station Access project shows that sometimes small changes can make a big difference to local people. In addition, the Pendle Witch Hopper service illustrates an innovate approach to tackling the end of an external funding stream that did not result in the total loss of a valuable bus service in a rural area.

These inventive project ideas were inspired by a range of sources and indicate the importance of listening to residents, partners and colleagues when ideas are being developed. Indeed some of the projects included had been generated by other council departments and the application of the accessibility planning team's skills enhanced the development and delivery of the project.

4.4 Funding and finance

The 'Review of Rural Accessibility Planning' (UTP, 2008b) indicated that some authorities were struggling to identify funding to drive forwards the accessibility planning agenda. The projects included in this study had achieved funding through a wide range of sources. Some of the projects were more traditional and had obtained funding through county council passenger transport budgets; others had received external grant funding topped up with LTP2 money. One of the authorities had money specifically associated with delivering the accessibility strategy whilst others were working in partnership with external organisations who were funding projects.

In more detail, funding sources comprised:

- LTP2 funding;
- Passenger Transport funding;
- Liveability funding;
- Train Operator funding;
- Salary budget funding;
- Local Area Agreement funding; and
- Other local authority department funding.

This offers an indication of the breadth of funding sources that are available to the authorities currently implementing their accessibility strategies, achievable in some cases through working in partnership with other organisations.

4.5 Flexibility

Many of the authorities included in the case studies cited being 'reactive' as an important factor in the performance of the projects that they had undertaken. Frequently the projects had been piloted before being implemented fully and changes were made to the projects during the implementation process as a reaction to feedback from the pilot stage. This continuous modification process was seen as being very valuable during project development.

The need to be flexible was also an important factor for working in partnership with other organisations. This is because the partners' goals and ambitions need to be taken into account alongside those of the LTP2. Without a willingness to compromise in some areas the success of the partnership may be stymied.

4.6 Other issues and further research

A final issue that arose from the case studies was that while many of the project managers, felt that their projects were successful, they were struggling to measure that success. This was especially prominent in the schemes that were improving access without alterations to the public transport network and as such were unable to measure changes in accessibility using conventional measures such as accessibility planning software.

In addition there was some discussion regarding how the schemes' 'success' could be best measured, and the associated quantification of the benefits observed. It would be useful to undertake some further research to establish workable ways of measuring the 'success' of accessibility improvement schemes that would not prove to be too costly or onerous for the smaller scale schemes. This would help ensure budgets are being well spent and would assist project managers with the achievement of future funding.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The best practice case studies appended to this report offer an insight into a variety of projects operating in rural areas that aim to improve accessibility in some way. It is hoped that they will be used by authorities searching for more information on innovative ways of improving accessibility. The case studies are intended to offer a brief summary of the main factors that have had an impact upon the project, and the contacts who were involved in the research have been included in the write-ups for those wishing to find out more about a particular project.

It is hoped that the diversity of projects included has provided a stimulating summary of innovative best practice examples. In all cases success is linked to the hard work, time and effort of the respective officers involved in leading each project. The dynamics of the local project champions, the commitment of the project partners and a strong focus on providing a service which directly meets the needs of local communities are also key factors at play. There is 'no one size fits all' solution to improving rural accessibility in a world of finite financial and human resources. However the case studies discussed in this paper demonstrate that making the best use of available resources in conjunction with a real commitment from officers and project partners enables a tangible difference to be made to accessibility in rural areas.

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Notes

¹ Available at <http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/publications/thinkingaboutruraltransportsustainable/ruralaccessibilityisitreallypossible>