

# **ASSESSING THE VALUE OF BUS SERVICES FOR LEISURE.**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Supplying bus services for leisure tends to be low on the list of priorities, especially when utility services are being cut. There is even less political incentive to provide such services when they carry people out of the area or people from outside the area. However, rural bus services provided for leisure activities fulfil a number of purposes which rank high on the priorities of local authorities and National Parks: reducing social exclusion, bringing local employment, reducing car use and improving health.

This paper describes research carried out in 2010/2011 in nine rural areas of England and Wales to assess the impact of providing buses for leisure activities. The responses of 1,118 passengers give quantitative measures of the benefits of such services and the loss to the tourist areas if the buses were not provided indicating that two thirds of the passengers would not have visited the area without the bus and 62% of their spending would have been lost.

However, in an exercise conducted at the end-of-project seminar, participants were asked to allocate token budgets according to the benefits and value for money. The results and discussions indicate that empirical evidence may not be a major factor in deciding priorities and that different stakeholders have very different priorities for bus services in rural tourist areas.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Accounts of social inclusion and transport tend to relate to access within urban areas (see Hine 2004; Raje et al. 2003) or to accessibility to essential services from rural areas (see Farrington and Farrington 2005; Shucksmith 2000), but rarely access to rural areas for recreation. However, the introduction of free concessionary bus travel (Scotland in 2006, Wales 2002 and England 2008) has demonstrated that, given the opportunity, many older people enjoy leisure trips, often to rural areas and feel they enhance their quality of life (Andrews et al. 2011; Rye and Mykura 2009).

Most of the literature about public transport for tourism and leisure has focused on its potential to reduce car use (see; Eckton 2003; Guiver et al. 2007; Reeves 2006, p4). There are a number of projects in the UK (Cullinane and Cullinane 1999; Eaton and Holding 1996) and elsewhere (Dilworth 2003; White 2007) to encourage modal shift and reduce congestion, CO<sub>2</sub>, other emissions (Bavarian National Park 2012) and other environment damage (Transport For Leisure Ltd. 2000) and to increase capacity where road and parking space is limited (National Park Service, USA 2012). Examples include the Alpine Pearls (see <http://www.alpine-pearls.com/en/home.html>) (La Rocca 2009; Verbeek et al. 2011) the KonusCard in the Black Forest (Hilland

2011) and GUTi card in Bavaria (Wibmer 2012). The New Forest Tour estimates to have saved 147,000 car miles within the National Park in one year (New Forest Park Authority 2011-2012, p 11) and the Moorsbus claims a saving of one million car miles in the North York Moors National Park since 1994 (Bussell and Suthers 2010).

However, Dickinson and Robbins (2007) question the effectiveness of public transport in reducing car use because of the observed reluctance of visitors to use relatively frequent bus services, even where there are evident problems of congestion and lack of parking. Guiver (2009) also found that only 8% of car users had sought information about public transport to their destination despite the majority believing they decided on the mode only after fixing the destination. With 96% of visitors arriving in English National Parks by car (English National Parks Authorities Association, 2012), there is obviously room for more effective actions to reduce car use.

Many of the bus services provided in areas of recreation in the UK justify the expenditure involved through extra revenue generated in the destination area (see Bussell and Suthers, 2008 for the impact of the Moorsbus on local businesses and New Forest Park Authority Annual Report 2011-2012, p 11, where it is estimated that the New Forest Tour generated over £500,000 to the area in spending.). Because many of the bus-borne visitors spend in local businesses, who in turn use local suppliers and employees, the value of the spending is increased by the local multiplier effect (New Economics Foundation and The Countryside Agency 2002). Guiver and Lumsdon (2006) report that the average spending per day per bus passenger in a survey of 18 tourist areas was £16.18 excluding accommodation costs and in a similar survey of 14 areas in 2006, the average spending was calculated at £18.07 per person per day excluding accommodation costs (Institute of Transport and Tourism, 2007). Downward and Lumsdon (2004) however, suggest that the reason that bus users' spending is below the spending of car users is poorly timed bus services, which do not allow bus users to stay later in the evening to buy evening meals, etc. Thompson and Ferguson (2006) found that visitors to Scotland coming from longer distances tended to have longer stays, but are also more likely to use public transport. Because they stay longer, they make a greater contribution to the local economy.

Although the importance of fresh air and exercise have long been understood as beneficial to physical and mental health, it is only in recent years that attempts have been made to estimate their value. In a report on ten case studies of 'green exercise' Petty et al. (2005) found significant improvements in self-esteem and moods following the exercise, Barton et al (2011) report similar findings. Ward Thompson et al. (2004) found the recreational use of Scottish woodlands can make an important contribution to 'quality of life capital' and provided both physical and psychological benefits, but they need to be accessible for people to make regular use of them.

Leisure travel involves far more discretion than utility travel: not only is the journey itself discretionary, so are its destination, timing and mode. There is evidence that mode can be chosen before destination (Guiver et al. 2008) and that some destinations without easy public transport access, especially railway stations, are seen as inaccessible by tourists without ready access to a car, including many visitors from overseas within Scotland (Thompson and Ferguson 2006). Thompson and Ferguson (2006) found that the greater distance travelled by visitors to Scotland, the less likely

they were to use a private car, but mode of travelling to an attraction reflected its accessibility by the different modes, so attractions close to stations were likely to attract a higher proportion of visitors arriving by train. They also note that mode of arrival in Scotland does not determine how people travel within their destination area, with evidence that people arriving by car also used other modes during their stay.

Guiver et al (2006 p227) propose a continuum of visitors, from those who are destination specific (and so would be prepared to change mode in order to reach that destination) to those who are mode specific and likely to change destinations if there were barriers to using their chosen mode. Thompson and Ferguson (2006) also suggest that there may be some correlation between public transport use in the home country and the propensity to use public transport while on holiday.

Despite the recognition that public transport serves an important role in reducing social exclusion, particularly in rural areas, increasing prosperity and reducing the impacts of traffic (Department for Transport 1998, 2003, 2004) there is no recognised method of evaluating whether they give value for money or even formalising the different social objectives they fulfil. There is even less guidance for services primarily for leisure, in fact a recent report about the importance of buses to the national economy (Mackie et al. 2012) failed to include any reference to leisure or tourist travel.

There is no doubt that leisure services face difficulties in funding with several services having been withdrawn in recent years (Heather Hopper Cairngorms National Park in 2010, many Peak District National Park services in 2011, Trossachs Trundler 2010) and other areas are feeling the pinch. Even one of the most commercially successful tourist bus routes, the Norfolk CoastHopper, is facing reductions in services due to changes in funding arrangements (Coulson 2011). This has resulted in other areas looking for alternative funding. The Lake District now has an ambitious programme for revolutionising visitor travel, funded by the Local Sustainable Transport Fund, with which it hopes to influence mode of arrival once there is confidence in the visitor offering within the area. A Community Interest Company has formed by volunteers to attract funding from a variety of sources in the Yorkshire Dales and Forest of Bowland. The second New Forest Bus Tour has been underwritten by businesses following the success of the first tour and evidence of the spending generated (Gregory 2011), while local businesses have banded together in Breadalbane to provide a tourist bus (Webster 2012). Other areas are considering approaching accommodation providers in areas benefitting from seasonal bus provision.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as a knowledge Exchange project to combine the skills of Institute of Transport and Tourism and expertise of local bus managers. In 2010 seven organisations took part: The Peak District National Park, Yorkshire Dales Community Interest Company, Hadrian's Wall Heritage Ltd, Brecon Beacons National Park, Northumberland Coast Area of Outstanding Beauty, Three Rivers Community Rail Project (Hampshire), Durlston Park (Dorset). In 2011 there were further surveys in Norfolk and Brighton and Hove, resulting in a total of 1118 responses.

The main object of the research was to make optimum use of the expertise of the researchers, by designing a survey which could be used autonomously by managers of bus services. The questionnaire gathered socio-demographic details about the passengers, information about the journey they were undertaking at the time of the survey, their spending on the survey day, what they would have done if the bus had not been running, as well as their attitudes about a number of issues.

The questionnaire template was designed to be easily adapted for each area. The questionnaire was handed to passengers by local surveyors on the surveyed bus, together with reply-paid envelopes. The responses were transferred to macro-enabled spreadsheet which generated an instant report of the area's results. The spreadsheets for all the areas were amalgamated to give the total results and analysed further using SPSS. Unless otherwise stated, the percentages quoted refer to the proportion of valid responses for each question. All numbers have been corrected up to the nearest whole number.

## **4. FINDINGS**

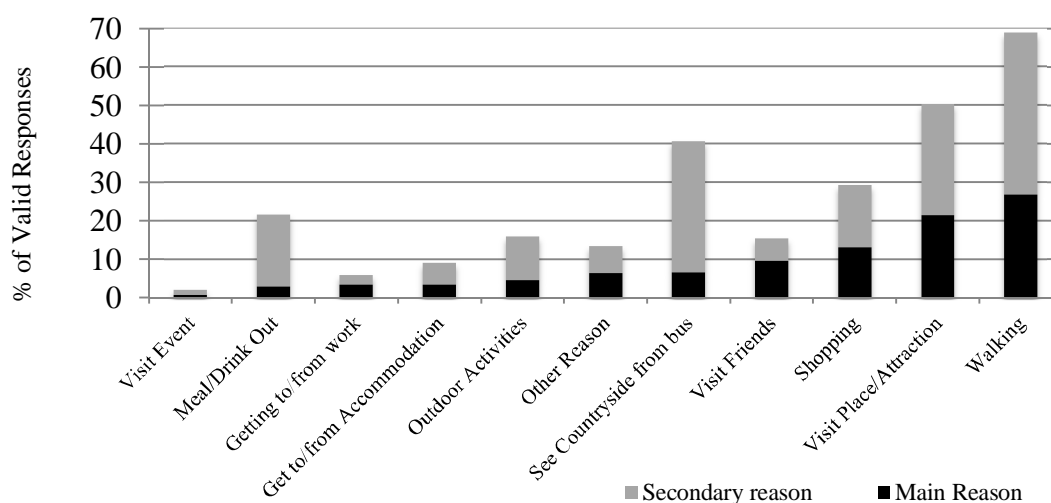
### **4.1. Passengers**

The passengers are predominantly older than the general population and women slightly outnumbered men. Approximately 9% reported a disability affecting mobility. The passengers are mainly from lower income groups, (with a high proportion of retired people), but nearly 10% have incomes of £50,000 pa plus. 49% had a car available. Visitors from overseas accounted for 8% of the passengers (93 passengers) and the greatest number (18) came from the USA.

### **4.2. Journeys**

The main primary journey purpose was walking (27%) followed by visiting a place or attraction (22%), shopping (13%) and visiting friends or relations (10%) and seeing the countryside from the bus (7%). Walking, seeing the countryside from the bus and visiting a place or attraction were also important secondary reasons for the journey (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Journey purposes**



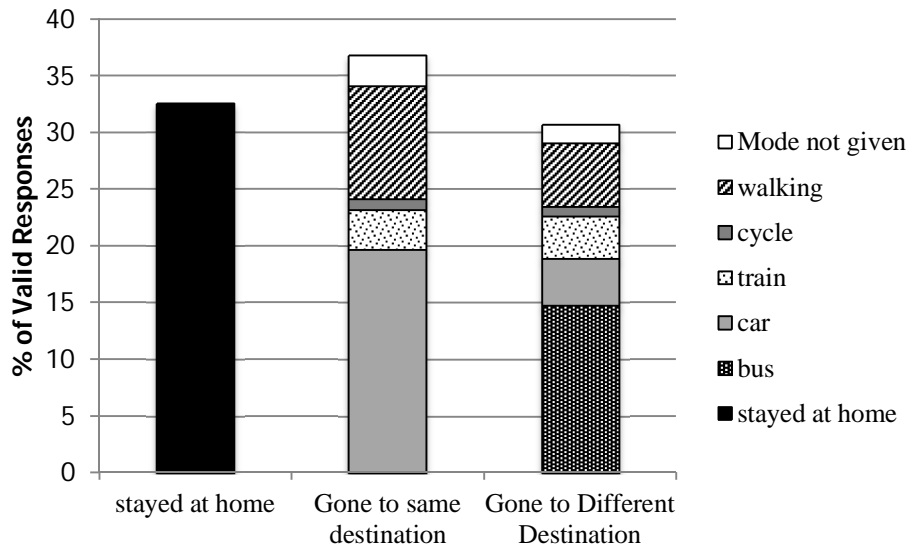
### 4.3. Social Inclusion

The question about what people would have done if the bus had not been running indicated that one third of the respondents would have stayed at home without the bus. The age groups with the highest propensity to stay at home are the under 16 year-olds (55%) and those aged 70 and over (47%). Likewise, those in the lowest income band (under £10,000 pa) had the highest proportion of respondents (42%) who would stay at home if the bus were not running while only 16% of those in the highest income band (£50,000 +) would stay at home. 49% of the people with a disability would also stay at home without the bus.

### 4.4. Car Use Reduction

The question about alternatives if the bus were not running also gave evidence of car use reduction. Those who replied they would have gone to the same or a different destination were asked to specify the mode they would have used (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Alternatives if the bus was not running**



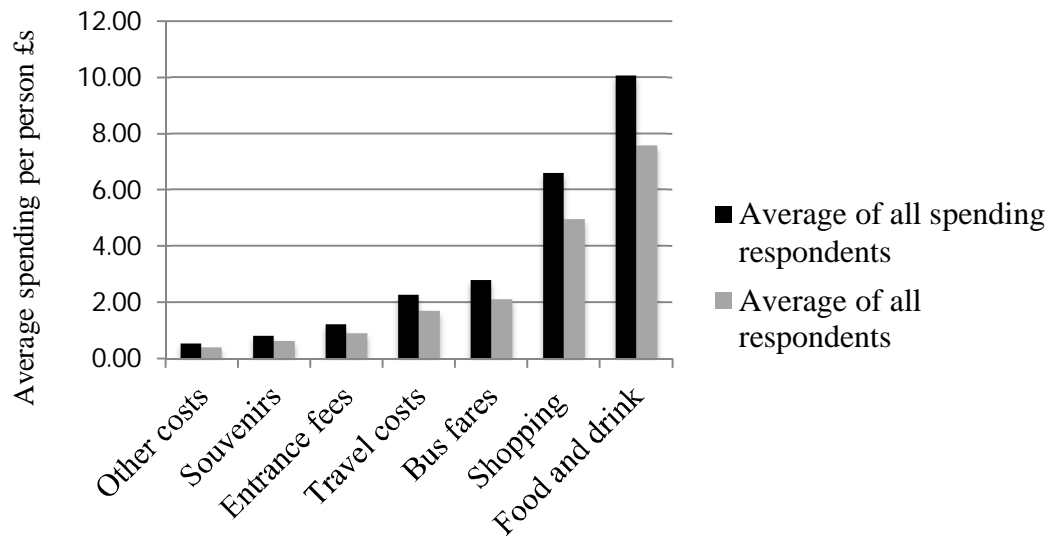
While one third would have stayed at home, the majority of people going to the same destination (58% or 21% of the total valid responses) would use a car, with just 3% of those who would go to a different destination intending to use a car. In total, one quarter of the respondents indicated that, without the bus, they would have used a car. While, no doubt, many would have travelled in pairs or groups, this still represents an increase in traffic in rural tourist areas.

#### 4.5. Local Spending

Respondents were asked how much they had spent/intended to spend on the day of the survey on a variety of goods and services. The average spending for those who reported any spending (75% of all respondents) was £24.26 or £18.25 when averaged over all respondents. Figure 3 shows the average allocation of spending for both calculations.

In addition to the day-time spending one third (365) of the respondents planned to stay overnight the night after the survey and their average duration of stay was 6.23 nights. The average price per person per night was £22.23, which averages out over all the respondents as an extra £6.59 of local spending per passenger per day and brings the total to £24.84. Excluding the people who would not have visited the destination reduces the number of visitors by 66.3% and spending by 62%.

**Figure 3: Spending**



#### **4.6. Health and Well-being**

Most respondents (90%) reported that they walked, cycled or took part in another physical activity during their day out. Generally, satisfaction is extremely high, with all attributes being rated as 'good' or 'very good' by over 80% of the respondents except for 'frequency' which was rated 'good' or 'very good' by 73%. Likewise, 89% of valid responses to the question 'Did you enjoy your visit today?' either replied "I had a great time" (68%) or 'I mostly enjoyed it' (21%). When asked if they would recommend the bus to their friends, over 89% 'agreed' and 64% say they come to the area because the transport is good.

#### **4.7. Findings: Summary**

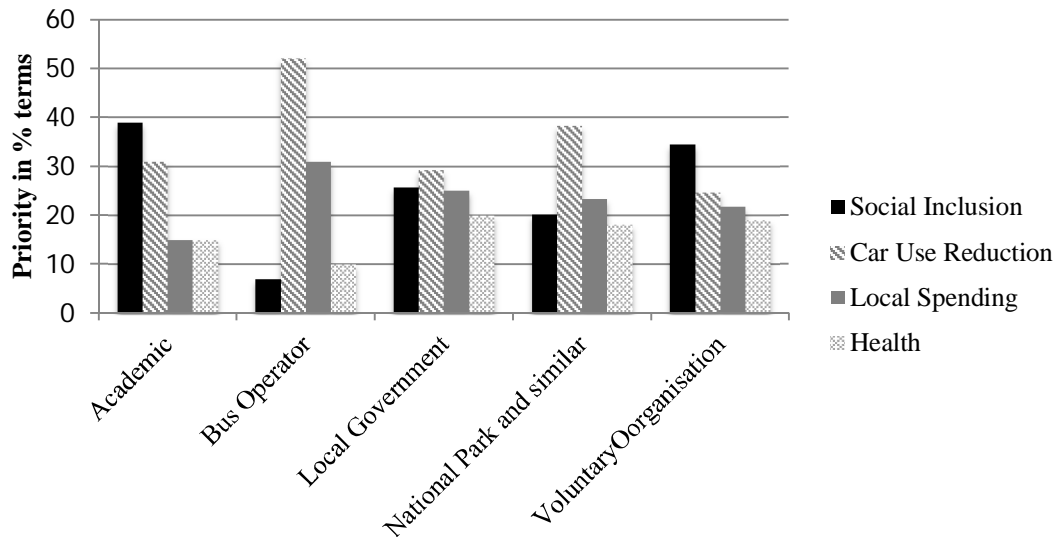
The survey results demonstrate very clearly that buses provided for leisure purposes in rural areas satisfy a number of needs and goals of local authorities, including National Parks. They reduce social exclusion and car use, in often environmentally sensitive areas, bring spending to the local area and appear to contribute to health and well-being.

### **5. SEMINAR ACTIVITY: BUDGET ALLOCATION**

The seminar organised for the end of the project attracted nearly 50 participants involved with the funding and provision of buses for recreation and leisure in rural areas, including bus operators, academics, representatives of local authorities, voluntary groups, National Parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty. While most of the day comprised of presentations about buses in rural tourist areas, the opportunity was taken to explore the priorities of different types of stakeholder. Participants were grouped according to their role (operators, academics, local authorities, voluntary groups and National Parks and similar). They were initially asked to record their personal priorities between the following goals: social inclusion,

reducing car use, generating local spending and health and well-being. Figure 4 shows the aggregated totals for each issue for each group.

**Figure 4: Professionals' Initial Priorities**

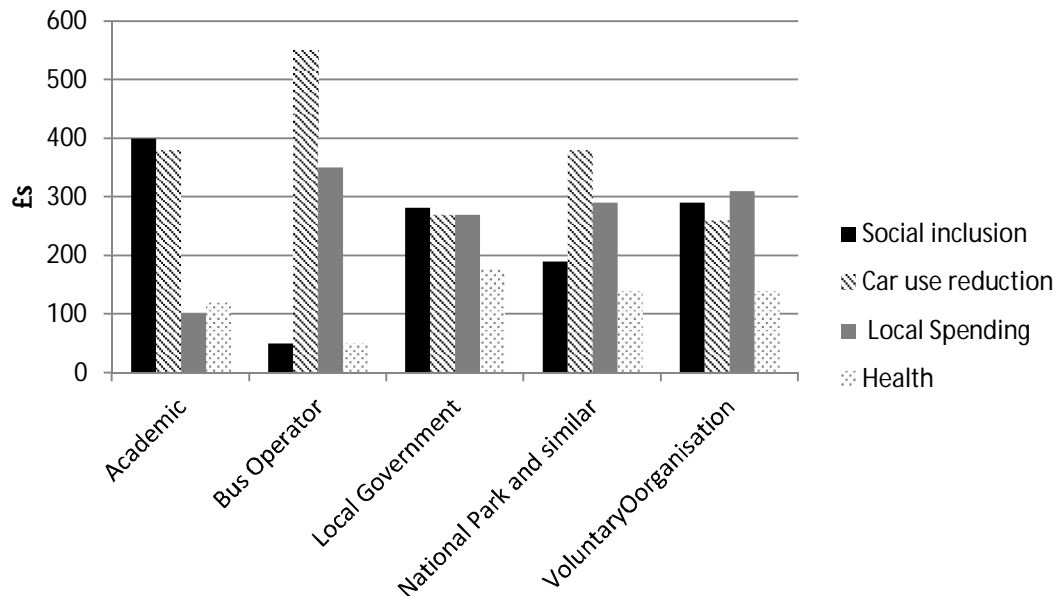


The priorities differed greatly: car use reduction was the most important for the bus operators and National Park officers, social inclusion was the highest priority for voluntary organisations and academics, while local authorities accorded almost equal priority to each aim.

Next each group was given a token £1,000 to allocate between these goals. They were given a set of (fictitious) figures showing what could be bought in terms of: the number of extra people who would get out for a day, the car miles which could be replaced, the total income which would be generated and hours of extra physical activity which would be undertaken. The figures indicated that any allocation of less than £500 on local spending would generate less than it cost. They were asked to discuss their group's allocation and decide on how the £1,000 would be spent. The budget allocations are shown in Figure 5. Each group included local spending in their budget, but none granted it over £500, which meant it would be ineffective.



**Figure 5: Professionals' Allocation of Budgets**



The negotiations on each table were recorded to give insights into the decision-making processes, and the following themes emerged:

- Participants found it difficult to allocate resources according to their effectiveness if this meant the final budget did not appear to reflect their priorities. So, although investment in local spending was not effective below £500, many participants wanted to register its importance by allocating it some of their budget.
- In the desire to reach a consensus, stronger voices tended to have their way, with other, more ambivalent, participants more likely to concede.
- Tables developed different strategies to conduct the negotiations including just averaging the individual allocations to avoid discussions
- The allocation was not just to abstract ideas as these also represented different groups of beneficiaries. This made it harder to justify spending money to reduce car use, when this pulled money away from social inclusion and a possibly more deserving client group.

In the following discussion several participants commented that they found it difficult to comply with the instruction to see each benefit separately, when in practice measures to improve the performance in terms of one benefit would also help realise other benefits (for example reducing fares might attract more car-users while also helping to alleviate social exclusion).

## **6. DISCUSSION**

The research confirms previous findings that buses in rural tourist areas can attract new visitors (Bussell and Suthers, 2008; Guiver and Lumsdon 2006), reduce car use (New Forest Park Authority 2011-2012; Reeves, 2006) and generate spending in the

area (Bussell and Suthers, 2008, New Forest Park Authority 2011-2012). It also suggests that such services can play a role in improving health and well-being. The study also demonstrates a method to record and measure such benefits.

What has not been possible yet, is the comparison of costs and benefits. However, like most public transport, once a service is running it makes sense to attract users, even if they are not the primary target market. Experience with such services indicates that they are far from reaching their potential in levels of service, quality and variety of offering and marketing. In the past they have been starved of funding and often suffered from short-term, insecure support and short planning cycles (Dickinson and Dickinson 2006) although there is evidence (Gronau and Kagermeier 2007) that such services need three to four seasons to achieve a steady patronage. While improving the services would inevitably require investment, the increase in patronage from visitors and residents may recoup at least some of the initial expenditure.

A well-marketed public transport system within a destination area can encourage modal shift from the car for the journeys to and from the area. The Lake District National Park and Cumbria County Council (2011, p4), recipients of a substantial grant to make recreational travel within part of their area more sustainable, recognised that tourists would be unwilling to arrive without a car unless they had confidence in the local public transport. Although they calculate that nearly half the carbon generated by tourists to the Lake District is from the journeys to and from the area, they have prioritised local transport in the first stage of their improvements in order to establish that confidence.

Public transport offers a potential to offer interpretation to visitors, as witnessed by urban tour buses, such as in Edinburgh and Inverness. However, while tour guides appear popular on Hadrian's Wall buses, there is no evidence that they increase patronage. New technology may offer greater prospects of interpretation through passengers' own phones and mobile devices. The Lake District is currently experimenting with apps to give visitors ideas for local trips without using cars and have already found that real-time information about bus services is valued, provided there is mobile signal (Cade 2013).

The data reveal that the provision of transport can influence the choice of destination, with two thirds of current passengers saying they would not visit the same destination without the provision of the bus, either because they would not travel at all or would visit another destination. It is evident that people who are dependent on bus travel would be unable to reach a desired destination (unless it were within walkable/cyclable distance) however, some passengers show more allegiance to the mode than the destination, suggesting that going by bus is more important than the destination. Much of this may be related to the concessionary bus pass. People in their sixties and older can travel on any scheduled bus for free. Many of these people are going out for a bus ride and any destination with suitable services may attract them.

The evidence from the seminar activity is more concerning. It exposes quite different priorities for different groups of stakeholders, indicating that convincing arguments about value for money would need to be made on different criteria to different potential funders. It also appears to indicate that budget allocations are not only made on the criteria of value for money, but also represent the symbolic importance of

groups of people. This implies that, while factual evidence might be useful, whether or not these services are supported will remain a political decision and it may be that supporting leisure services when services to employment or health care are being reduced might not be politically acceptable, even if they make economic sense. This research was made possible through a grant awarded by the Economic and Social Research Council, but normally managers must decide whether to spend money on monitoring or supplying buses, resulting in low levels of information about how the bus is used and the benefits it brings.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The survey of over 1,000 bus passengers using services in nine rural tourist areas of England and Wales demonstrates how it is possible to measure some of the benefits of bus services used for leisure. These include reducing social exclusion and car use, generating spending in the local area and improvements in health and well-being. The study found that approximately two thirds of the visitors and spending would be lost to the current destination if the bus were not be provided and a quarter of the respondents would switch to car travel.

A seminar activity for professionals involved in managing such bus services found very different priorities between different groups. It also revealed that value for money was only one consideration in allocating budgets to buses.

If bus services are to be provided in rural areas for leisure activities, improvements in marketing and a better tourist offering may attract more passengers and increase their fares income. Another source of finance may be tourism providers along the route.

Further research is suggested to look into the costs of providing the services, so that a more thorough cost-benefit analysis could be undertaken. The method of evaluating bus services could equally be employed for utility services although different criteria might be required.

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## **Jo Guiver**

Jo has always been interested in how transport shapes lives and landscapes. Her PhD, looking at how people talk about buses and cars, brought together experience as a social worker in Dundee at the time of tenement clearing, bus travel at deregulation and a knowledge of the importance of language and communication. Since 2004, she has researched leisure travel, its environmental impact and ways to reduce this. Recently, she has written about the value brought to tourist areas by bus passengers and the impact of travel disruption on travellers and their social networks.

## **Nick Davies**

Nick has been research assistant for the Institute of Transport and Tourism for seven years. With a degree in Environmental Sciences, he has participated in and led several studies into the environmental impact of travel to tourist sites. Most recently he has been mapping and researching public transport access to walking trails in Monmouthshire. He is currently researching leisure walking route choices for his PhD.