



West Midlands Rural Community Council: Rural Transport

The West Midlands Rural Community Council Network draws together the four rural community councils (RCCs) which operate within the region. Each member RCC is an independent charitable organisation with a broad range of member organisations including parish councils, voluntary and community organisations and village halls, and has access through newsletters and mailings to over four thousand groups and individuals throughout the region. The RCCs have the common aims of promoting voluntary action and improving rural life. Across the West Midlands the RCCs have a combined turnover of over £3.75 million and employ over one hundred full time equivalent staff providing technical and professional support on issues and projects to people in local communities.

RCCs have a considerable understanding of rural issues borne out of a long involvement with rural communities. They provide a forum for voluntary and community organisations and a wide range of information and advisory services. They enjoy membership of many partnerships that encourage community development and capacity building in rural areas and that manage projects delivering benefits to rural communities. Part of the RCCs' effectiveness stems from the close relationships they have with networks including village hall committees, playing fields trusts and parish councils. Recently they have also developed relationships with regional structures, most notably through the West Midlands Regional Rural Affairs Forum, the West Midlands Rural Network, RAWM (Regional Action West Midlands - the voluntary and community sector network) and the West Midlands European Network.

Transport

RCCs have a long history of involvement with transport issues and in the development of innovative solutions to rural transport problems going back for at least 30 years. The Community Council of Shropshire developed voluntary car schemes in conjunction with Shropshire County Council in the 1970s, dial-a-ride minibus services in the late 1980s and the Wheels 2 Work scheme (with Community First in Herefordshire and Worcestershire) in the mid-1990s. More recently RCCs have become members of Rural Transport Partnerships and in some cases they are the lead agencies managing them (North Shropshire, East and West Staffordshire). RCCs have also worked extensively on trying to influence transport policies and programmes at various levels in order to benefit rural communities and in particular people suffering from social exclusion. For example the Warwickshire RCC is involved on the Steering and Consultation Groups of the County Local Transport Plan.

Research by the Countryside Agency found that transport is the single most important concern of people living in rural areas.

Rural Strategic Engagement Fund

The Rural Community Council Network was successful in its bid to the Regional Strategic Engagement Fund (RSEF) under the health and regeneration theme for funding of £35,000 for one year from 1 April 2002. Managed by RAWM and funded by Advantage West Midlands the purpose of the RSEF was to provide capacity building support to regionally and sub-regionally significant communities of interest to enable them to engage in regional policy and strategy development. The fund recognised the impact that the work of RCCs locally has on the health and regeneration of rural communities and provided support to enable the RCCs to work collectively to increase the participation of rural communities in shaping and informing the rural agenda across the region.

This paper is one of a series of four papers produced by the West Midlands RCC Network covering rural transport, rural housing, social enterprise and voluntary sector infrastructure support agencies.

For an Executive Summary of all four or copies of individual papers contact Community First.

A summary of all activity undertaken under the RSEF programme is also available.

RURAL TRANSPORT

Transport has been a high profile issue for government in recent years. Issues of social inclusion, particular problems for rural communities, pollution, global warming and safety have all been clearly recognised and to a greater or lesser degree acted upon. Research by the Countryside Agency found that transport is the single most important concern of people living in rural areas.

- Government transport policy is set out in "Transport 2010 - The 10 Year Plan" of July 2000. Chapter 1 of the Plan summarises the Government's vision by stating that, "Our vision for transport in this country is for a modern, safe, high quality network that better meets people's needs and offers more choice to individuals, families, communities and businesses" and "Good transport is essential to an enhanced quality of life, to a strong economy and to a better environment. Improving public transport is also vital in reducing social exclusion, particularly for people who have less access to a car including women, the old, the young and disabled people. It will help create a fairer society".



- Government policy towards rural areas is set out in the Rural White Paper of November 2000. This devotes a chapter to transport and states "There are particular problems of access to services for the one sixth of rural households who do not have the use of a car. These include many older people (and those who are frail or disabled), and young people, for whom it is often difficult to get access to training and job opportunities - or even to enjoy a night out with friends. Even when a family has a car some members may not have access to it during the day and women in particular are often more dependent on public transport" (page 55).
- In July 2000 the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions published a report "Social Exclusion and the Provision and Availability of Public Transport". The research for this report included four rural case study areas, one of which was in Shropshire. This reached a conclusion that "People without cars had difficulty getting about and were

clearly seriously disadvantaged in terms of access to facilities, be they work, education, personal services, leisure or anything else. For many more the lack of transport definitely reduced the quality of life".

- In addition to social inclusion issues and the provision of a fairer deal for rural communities the Government (along with many others) is concerned about the environmental impact of transport. Paragraph 8.9 of the Ten Year Plan states that "The Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution has highlighted the importance of reducing the impacts of transport on the environment. Action to achieve this, both locally and as part of wider international efforts, is one of our key objectives in this Plan".
- Safety is also an important issue which is given attention in the Ten year Plan. At paragraph 7.1 it states "The Plan provides the resources to deliver our Integrated Transport White Paper commitment to improving safety on all modes of transport. We want people to travel safely and to feel secure whether they are on foot or bicycle, in a car, on a train, or bus, at sea or on a plane".
- The Countryside Agency report (page 4) on the "The State of the countryside 2002 " for the West Midlands states that "rural parishes in the West Midlands had the lowest level of public transport provision (in terms of bus services operating 6 or 7 days a week) of any English region".

the issues and policy background

During the last few years new initiatives to address rural transport problems have been introduced. These include Rural Bus Grants, the Rural Bus Challenge scheme, Rural Transport Partnerships and the Parish Transport Grant scheme. This has meant that the funding allocated to rural public transport has increased significantly. The same period has seen the advent of the Strategic Rail Authority and the development of Community Rail Partnerships and the Rail Passenger Partnership schemes. The latter schemes are relevant to all areas but there are notable examples of take up in rural areas.

Rural bus grant allocations for authorities in the West Midlands for the period 2000/01 to 2003/04 are shown below.

Local Authority	Amount allocated in 2000/01	2001/02 Allocation	Indicative Allocation 2002/03	Indicative Allocation 2003/04
Herefordshire	522,462	667,144	763,598	779,674
Shropshire	630,354	804,914	921,287	940,682
Staffordshire	809,149	1,033,221	1,182,602	1,207,499
Stoke-on-Trent	5,423	6,925	7,926	8,093
Telford and The Wrekin	76,048	97,107	111,147	113,487
Warwickshire	596,387	761,540	871,643	889,993
West Midlands	86,800	110,837	126,862	129,532
Worcestershire	675,505	862,568	987,277	1,008,061
Total	3,402,128	4,344,256	4,972,341	5,077,022



Rural Bus Challenge 2000 allocations were

Local Authority	Amount awarded in 2000
Herefordshire	£129,452
Worcestershire	£994,000
Shropshire	£282,697
Staffordshire	£118,000
Telford & Wrekin	£184,000
Warwickshire	£159,792

Despite the greater distances involved, studies have shown that the actual cost of motoring for people in rural areas is only slightly higher than for those in towns, because fuel consumption is lower on less congested rural roads. In real terms motoring costs have changed little since 1974, whereas bus fares have increased by 80%. It is unsurprising that the proportion of journeys made by car in rural areas has increased from 64% in 1985 to 73% in 1997. These facts suggest that, whilst it is important to recognise the continuing importance of car travel in rural areas, the most pressing need is to protect and improve transport for people who do not - and may never - have access to a car.

The Government's approach in recent months has however led to various concerns being raised about the extent to which there is commitment to the principles of the Ten Year Plan. Following Government announcements in December 2002 the Countryside Agency said "Although we broadly welcome the government's commitment to environmental protection, we

have concerns that elements of the multi-modal studies relating to roads will be implemented at the expense of other measures such as new public transport strategies". English Nature took a similar view and said that "The purpose of the multi-modal studies is to look at a range of transport options. We have concerns that due to problems of implementation road schemes are going forward by default. We would like to see a greater shift away from road schemes to more demand management." A BBC Panorama programme broadcast on 16 February, drawing on experts including former government transport advisors and Professor David Begg the Chairman of the Commission for Integrated Transport, clearly indicated that the government was stepping back from its commitment to sustainable transport policies. The new version of the Strategic Rail Authority's Strategic Plan together with indications that cost reductions may be looked for in forthcoming franchising exercises raises concerns about the future of rural rail services.

Examples of good practice

There are many examples of good practice in developing solutions, and particularly innovative solutions, to rural transport problems.

These include

- Dial-a-ride and community minibuses
- Community car schemes
- Taxi buses
- Wheels to Work schemes
- Demand responsive services
- Putting bus positioning moves in to public service
- Wider use of education services
- Improved public transport information systems
- Integration of bus and rail services
- Taxi voucher schemes



Many of these are included in the Countryside Agency's good practice guide "Great ways to go".

In the West Midlands the RCCs have been involved in

- Establishing the first dial-a-ride minibus services in Shropshire, in the Oswestry and Shrewsbury areas
 - Setting up the Village Taxibus in Harbury, Warwickshire
 - Setting up the Shipston Link Community Minibus in Warwickshire by which volunteers provide a scheduled service
 - Inaugurating the Wheels to Work concept and implementing the pioneering scheme in Herefordshire and Shropshire. Subsequently setting up the scheme in Warwickshire
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Several innovative schemes have been implemented through Rural Transport Partnerships such as

- "You are here" village specific timetable in Warwickshire
- The Warwickshire "Access to Health" flowchart to increase awareness and assist hospitals and health centres to make appointments at times when patients can get there
- The Stone - Uttoxeter dial-a-ride shoppers' bus in Staffordshire which carries a fridge and collects groceries for local residents
- The Gnosall Rural Link in Staffordshire which uses two MPVs to connect villages into main bus routes (operated under Arriva licence with volunteer drivers trained by the Company)
- In Staffordshire a taxi voucher scheme for people with mental illness which enables people living in the community to access mental health services where public transport is unavailable
- A taxibus from Ellesmere and nearby villages in Shropshire connecting to the main Wrexham - Whitchurch bus route offering commuting opportunities
- Putting bus positioning runs into public service providing commuting links on the Oswestry - Ellesmere - Wem - Whitchurch corridor in Shropshire

These examples are concerned with the provision of transport but what matters more than anything is rural people's access to facilities, jobs and services. In parallel with transport improvement it is, therefore,

important that initiatives continue to be taken to improve services and job opportunities in rural areas. The Countryside Agency's rural proofing checklist is very relevant here. In particular point 4 asks the questions *"Will the policy affect travel needs or the ease and cost of travel? Will the impact be different in sparsely populated or remote rural areas, where typically journey times are longer, public transport is poor, there are higher levels of car dependency and travel options are limited or expensive, especially for low income groups?"* Rural solutions put forward in the check list are *"reduce the need to travel by using mobile services, local delivery or telephone/internet; ease travel by co-ordinating or improving transport links (e.g. additional services, demand responsive transport, community transport/community car schemes, taxi vouchers); alleviate the costs of travel by subsidising services or individuals (remembering that there may be no public transport service between many locations)".*



What needs to be done?

Whilst the above indicates that considerable progress has been made in improving rural transport through both conventional and innovative approaches in many areas this was starting from a very low base. A great deal still need to be done if rural communities and in particular socially excluded people are to have adequate access to services and facilities on a sustainable basis. It needs to be recognised that local community based transport initiatives can sometimes take a long time to get off the ground. If real needs are to be catered for then a community development approach needs to be used. Adequate development time and sufficient and consistent support need to be available. Substantial efforts need to be put into publicising new services and encouraging people to use them. In some cases these requires a culture change.



- Continuity of funding - many innovative services which have proved to be effective and which cater for people suffering from social exclusion are by definition unlikely to be commercial

- Public transport needs to recognise the move to more flexible patterns of employment - greater need for unconventional and flexible services
 - "Transport proofing" of service providers - a prime example is the health service
 - Much more integration of transport modes and integration within modes
 - More regional planning of transport - currently Centro only covers the central part of the region and there is a need for more regional planning and delivery of transport services
 - Wide Concessionary fare schemes - current district based schemes are inadequate and discriminate against people who live in three tier local government areas and on the edge of local authority areas
 - Major improvements in public transport information (fares as well as services - many people do not realise what services are available or how competitive with car travel many fares are) both in advance of and during journeys - combined sources of information on rail, bus and unconventional transport through a national portal and real time information
 - Importance of pedestrians and cyclists - their needs must be catered for and there need to be improved facilities for integrating cycle and bus and train use (facilities for cycles on trains are particularly poor and inconsistent in the region)
 - Active spreading of good practice - there are lots of good schemes which deserve wider implementation and which in terms of equity should be available to more people
 - Consideration of public transport provision when planning decisions are being made
 - Promoting policies which help to create sustainable rural communities where homes, work and other services and facilities are in proximity...The provision of a mix of housing types in new development is important here. Residents of "social housing" are more likely to make use of public transport
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- Role of the rural railway - there is still a significant network of railways serving rural parts of the West Midlands (although some lines had their intermediate stations closed many years ago) and they perform an important function for local as well as longer distance journeys.
- Reopening of railway stations on existing lines should be encouraged and made easier. Cost issues need to be addressed here.
- Encouraging modal shift by promoting use of cars in conjunction with other modes
- More liaison between community transport operators and commercial transport operators
- A standard test should be available for all volunteer drivers rather than different systems in different areas
- Local provision of services and facilities (non transport) including multi-purpose centres and mobile services
- Study of the effectiveness of conventional bus subsidies compared to spending money in alternative ways including the provision of local services and facilities rather than transport. The Commission for Integrated Transport has recently carried out work on this issue



Other Issues and Opportunities

Role of integrated public transport in relation to tourism. Increased use of public transport by tourists can bring environmental benefits and offer better services for local people.

Importance of solving capacity problems on railways - this is of regional significance. Capacity restraints in the West Midlands conurbation, in particular between Coventry and Wolverhampton and at Birmingham New Street, have knock-on effects which spread out to the rural network causing unreliability and delays. These can be particularly serious where services are less frequent and connections (to rail and other modes) crucial.

The government is currently consulting on future airport developments. The scale, impact and costs of many proposals are immense and contrast markedly with the situation of socially excluded people in rural areas

There is a great contrast in the government's willingness to allocate very large sums to motorway widening schemes arising out of Multi Modal Studies (MMSs) and the lack of dedicated funds for railway schemes. These billions of pounds also contrast strongly with the comparatively small sums allocated to rural public transport. The lack of effectiveness of such road schemes was highlighted by The Commission for Integrated Transport when it reacted to transport spending plans on 10/12/02 by stating "*These studies have inevitably concluded that some road improvements are needed to remove network bottlenecks. You cannot go from road building boom under the last government to nothing today. That wouldn't make sense. Good quality transport networks are vital to the economic well-being of the country as a whole and provides lifelines for the regions. But road improvements*

without measures to deter future traffic growth will result in the service level improvements for users being lost as induced traffic fills up the extra space provided. We will be back at square one all over again.

The Commission believes that, in the longer term, the most effective way of retaining service level improvements is a national system of congestion charging. Until charging becomes a realistic option CfIT recommends that road improvements are accompanied where necessary by other short term demand restraint measures such as ramp metering (traffic light controls on slip roads) and the use of priority lanes."



The Commission for Integrated Transport has undertaken detailed work and published a report on "Public Subsidy for the Bus Industry". This identifies a number of major issues and makes a large number of recommendations including a shift in subsidy payments from Fuel Duty Rebate (FDR) to an Incentive Payment per Passenger boarding (IPP) and a target for bus passenger growth outside of London. Amongst recommendations on Measures to Reduce Social Exclusion is Recommendation 11 "*Funding should be made available for additional bus and alternative services in small towns, rural areas and other communities where access to services is limited*".

Advocacy of the significance of transport especially for socially excluded people

To a large extent society, particularly in rural areas, can be divided into those who are transport rich and those who are transport poor. People with access to cars fall into the former category and people reliant on public transport into the latter. In between there are people

such as those in households which have only one car mainly used by one person, and low income households who have a car but cannot really afford to keep it on the road. This inequality is largely a function of income but also reflects age and gender. There is a generally low level of awareness of the difficulties for the transport poor by the transport rich. Also the transport rich are often unaware of what public transport is available. and, even if they are, never use it. Raising awareness of the non public transport user is important both as a contribution to reducing traffic and green house gas emissions and as a means for securing better public transport as a result of use by a wider spectrum of the community.

ACTION LIST FOR RCCS

1. Continue a high level of involvement in rural transport issues and participation in Rural Transport Partnerships.
2. Participate actively in the preparation and monitoring of Local Transport Plans.
3. Take all available opportunities to advocate the importance of rural public transport and integrated transport especially for socially excluded people by, for example,
 - Participation in conferences/seminars
 - Organisations of conferences/seminars
 - Making use of the media
 - Making representations to relevant bodies
 - Responding to consultation documents
4. Ensure that information and ideas are fed into the transport group of the Regional Rural Affairs Forum
5. Promote innovative solutions to rural transport in conjunction with local communities and community transport providers
6. Develop "green travel plans" and actively encourage own staff to maximise use of public transport.
7. Publicise availability of public transport and encourage rural communities to make use of public transport on a "use it or lose it" basis and in the interest of socially excluded members of the community.
8. When organising events try to ensure that a public transport option is available and in particular for timings to fit with public transport availability.
9. Take all available opportunities to spread good practice on rural transport solutions.
10. Take all available opportunities to promote "rural proofing" as it relates to access to services.

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