

Rural Transport Seminar – AI Summary meeting notes

Summary

The Rural Services Network hosted a seminar on rural transport that featured presentations from various organisations discussing initiatives to improve transportation access and services in rural areas. The seminar covered topics including smart mobility solutions, community transport for disabled children, and local council transport initiatives, with particular focus on addressing funding disparities between urban and rural areas. The discussion concluded with conversations about integrating transport planning with economic growth strategies, emphasizing the need for long-term funding, better assessment methods, and community involvement in local planning.

Rural Transport Funding Campaign Launch

The seminar on rural transport hosted by the Rural Services Network begins with an introduction by Kerry, who outlines the importance of rural transport as a lifeline for accessing services, employment, and combating social isolation. Kerry discusses the Rural Services Network's "Delivering for All" campaign, which calls for fair funding of rural services, appropriate metrics for rural areas, and a dedicated rural plan. She highlights the funding disparity between urban and rural councils and its impact on public transport provision. Kerry also mentions recent government announcements about transport investments, noting that they seem to focus primarily on urban areas. The session will feature presentations from four speakers representing three organisations, followed by a Q&A period.

Rural Transport Innovation Initiatives

Professor Stephen Joseph OBE from the University of Hertfordshire discusses the Smart Mobility Unit at the University of Hertfordshire and their work on rural transport. He highlights several initiatives and projects that are reducing car dependency in rural areas, including travel plans for rural workplaces, bike and cargo bike services, car clubs, and improved public transport systems like Cornwall's integrated ticketing. Stephen also mentions the potential of demand-responsive transport, tourism-related transport solutions, and mobility hubs. He emphasises that there are opportunities to improve rural transport through better governance, long-term funding, and simplified regulations, concluding that it is possible to reduce vehicle mileage and provide good alternatives to private car use in rural areas.

Inclusive Transport for Disabled Youth

Nick Mills and Charlotte Morley from the Community Transport Association present their project on creating connections and reimagining inclusive transport for disabled children and young people. Nick provides an overview of the Community Transport Association, a UK-wide membership charity representing about 1,300 organisations. He highlights that 45% of community transport operators in England are entirely or predominantly rural, with rural operators typically being smaller and more reliant on volunteers. The research project they are discussing is not exclusively rural but is relevant to rural areas across the UK.

Overcoming Travel Barriers for Disabled Youth

The research project aims to address travel barriers faced by disabled children and young people through community transport solutions. Nick and Charlotte discuss the current challenges, including fewer trips made by disabled people, impacts on well-being, and difficulties accessing social opportunities and education. They highlight barriers such as infrequent or absent public transport in rural areas, high costs, safety concerns, and inaccessible infrastructure. The project will work with disabled persons' organisations and community transport operators to develop recommendations and practical solutions, building on existing services that already cater to children and passengers with limited mobility.

Community Transport Research Project

Nick explains that the project involves a scoping stage from April to October 2025, including literature reviews and surveys of community transport operators, disabled persons organisations, and local authorities. From October 2025, the project will conduct 12 case studies in rural and urban areas across the UK, working with organisations to understand needs and co-produce solutions. The final stage from June 2026 will develop toolkits, training, and guidance for operators. Nick invites participation from relevant stakeholders and mentions upcoming surveys in July.

Cumberland Council's Rural Transport Initiatives

Karl Melville from Cumberland Council provides an overview of the authority's transport initiatives, focusing on rural transport solutions. The council has implemented six new bus routes since November, with varying levels of success. They conducted a public consultation to understand community needs, receiving over 3,000 responses. The council is analysing the results to prioritize investments and is working on a matrix for future route planning. They are also investing in infrastructure improvements, including standardised bus shelters with digital displays. The council is facing challenges in securing long-term funding and bus providers, leading them to consider purchasing their own buses. They are planning to introduce about 30 new routes and are piloting an on-demand "Big Uber" service in rural areas.

Cumberland Council's Transportation and Development Challenges

Karl discusses the challenges and opportunities facing Cumberland Council in relation to transportation and development. He mentions a 10,000-home garden village being planned outside Carlisle and the need to integrate it with the city. The council faces resource constraints due to competition from large employers in the region and limited access to framework contractors. Karl highlights their ambitious apprenticeship program, including opportunities for looked-after children, and their plan to redesign services for 24/7 operation. He also discusses the challenges of implementing pilot bus services and the need for longer-term funding from the government to ensure their sustainability.

Electric Buses and Infrastructure Challenges

Karl discusses the challenges of implementing electric buses in Cumberland, citing past unsuccessful attempts and current limitations. He mentions that the council has committed to making 25% of their vehicles electric in the next three years but notes difficulties with using electric vehicles for winter operations. The council is installing

1,500 new charging points, but faced obstacles in partnering with Stagecoach for electric buses due to depot investment requirements. Karl and a delegate discuss the need to integrate active travel solutions into new road projects and housing developments, highlighting the complexities of balancing different transportation needs in rural areas. A Westmorland & Furness Councillor adds that the A66 dualling project will include a cycle path, emphasising its importance for safety rather than just time saving.

Transportation and Meeting Innovations

The discussion covers several topics related to transportation and meetings. There are enquiries about driver training programs, particularly for buses and minibuses, to address the shortage of drivers. Karl from Cumberland explains their approach, including utilising their in-house driver training officer and offering apprenticeships. The conversation then shifts to the merits of online meetings versus in-person gatherings, with an advocate for more virtual meetings to reduce travel, although there are implications around digital connectivity and the reason for the meeting, for example with health visits some may prefer an in person approach. The group also briefly touches on the issue of unlawful parking near schools and potential solutions.

Rural Transport and Economic Growth

The panel discusses the importance of integrating transport planning with economic growth strategies in rural areas. They emphasise the need for long-term funding, better assessment methods for rural transport projects, and formal transport partnerships across national parks to address visitor travel issues. The discussion also touches on challenges like affordable housing shortages in rural communities and the potential benefits of devolution deals for rural areas. Panellists stress the importance of community transport involvement in local planning and the need to consider sustainable transport options when approving new developments.