

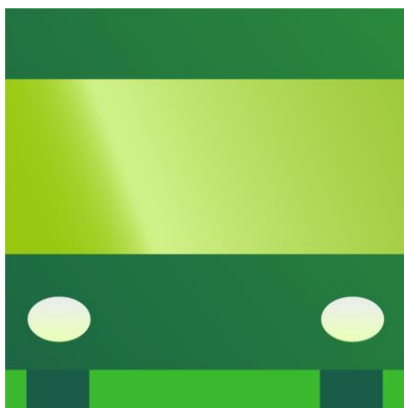
Revitalising Rural

 **RURAL SERVICES NETWORK**

Realising the Vision

RURAL TRANSPORT AND ACCESS TO SERVICES





Revitalising Rural

Realising the Vision

The Rural Services Network

We are a membership organisation and we work on your behalf for rural communities.

The RSN is the national champion for rural services, ensuring that people in rural areas have a strong voice. We are fighting for a fair deal for rural communities to maintain their social and economic viability for the benefit of the nation.

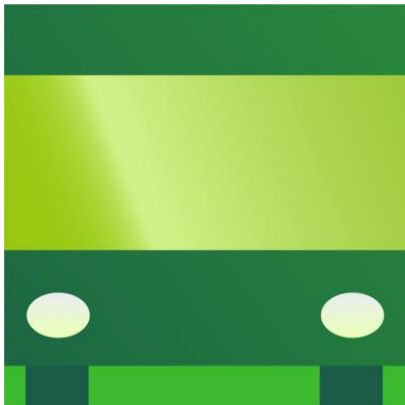
Our membership comprises 116 rural local authorities plus over 210 other rural service providers and interest groups including Rural Housing Associations, Healthcare Trusts and Charities. We also have over 200 larger Parish or Town Councils in the Rural Market Town Group.

You can find out more about the RSN at our website www.rsnonline.org.uk.

We always welcome new members and if you are interested in joining the RSN, click here for more information. [Join the RSN!](#)

Revitalising Rural, Realising the Vision

Revitalising Rural, Realising the Vision is a campaign run by the RSN, which sets out a number of policy asks in 14 key subject areas to help support rural areas to achieve their full potential, and to 'level-up' areas of historical underinvestment.



Revitalising Rural

Realising the Vision

RURAL TRANSPORT AND ACCESS TO SERVICES



Why it matters

Transport options provide communities with better access to employment opportunities and vital services, as well as to leisure or social opportunities. This matters most of all to those individuals without ready access to their own means of transport, whether because of their age, health, income or lifestyle choice. The inverse is equally true. Transport options provide employers with access to a workforce and make retail outlets, service providers and other businesses accessible to all their customers or clients. They are important for local economies and improved transport networks can help rural areas to level up.

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One group for whom transport matters a great deal is young people who, from age 16 to 18, must attend further education, an apprenticeship or work-based learning. Rural young people (who are unlikely to own their own transport) require realistic options to give them a chance to follow their career or education ambitions.

A lack of transport options can contribute towards loneliness, not least among older people, where it leaves them physically isolated in smaller rural communities further exacerbating health problems. Conversely viable transport options often assist wellbeing and social inclusion. A lack of transport options encourages car dependency (and for some makes it all but essential). This is detrimental to the environment, causing congestion, adding to air pollution and contributing to greenhouse gas emissions, contrary to the Government's net zero objective.

Transport is likely to undergo a massive change over the next decade or two, as explored in the Future of Mobility chapter in Government's 'The Grand Challenges' policy paper. This may embrace a rapid shift to electric and ultra-low emission vehicles, self-driving vehicles, and micro vehicles. However, to avoid replacing one congestion problem with another, policies will also need to encourage a move away from individual vehicle use. Enabling innovation to happen outside large urban centres may be key to its nationwide success.

The national policy context

Key elements of national policy include:

- Bus services – since deregulation in 1986 bus routes and timetables have largely been set by bus operators. The majority of routes are run on a commercial basis by those operators. However, local authorities (county or unitary councils) can subsidise loss making routes, or services that run at loss making times of the day. Subsidised services have been an important feature of rural provision, where passenger numbers are lower. The 1985 Transport Act puts an obligation on local authorities to identify and provide services they deem to be socially necessary. They may, however, conclude that none meet that criteria, not least when under severe budgetary constraint.
- A Better Deal for Bus Users – in 2019 Government announced a package of measures and £220 million for actions aiming to meet the needs of bus service users. It included £30 million for local authorities, so they can improve existing or restore lost services, plus funding for a Rural Mobility Fund (see below). The risk now is that this funding is used to restart routes which ceased during the Covid-19 lockdown or which were lost many years ago, rather than looking at new patterns of demand.

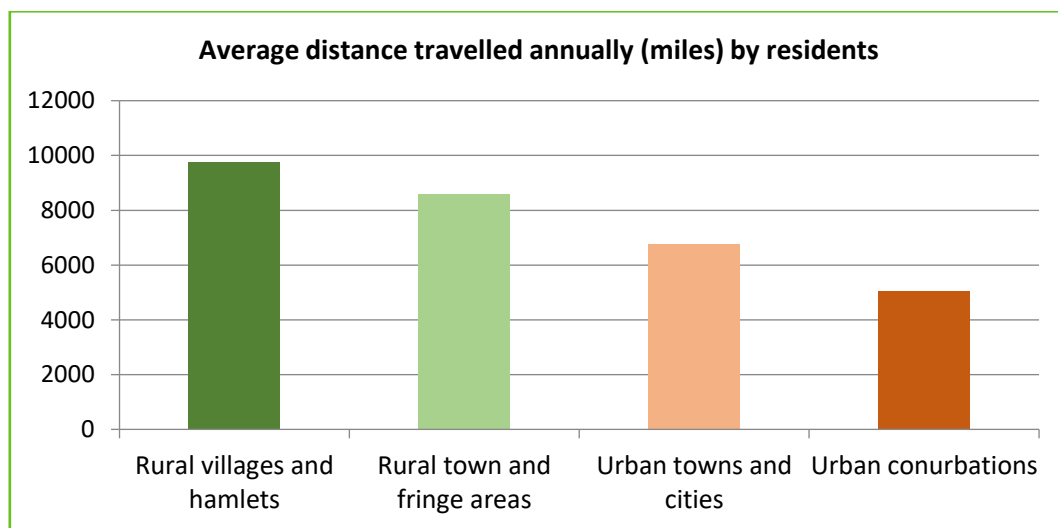


- National Bus Strategy – more recently still (March 2021) the Government published this strategy, committing an extra £3 billion to support bus services outside London during the current parliamentary period. Taking this forward, local transport authorities must now produce a Bus Service Improvement Plan and must commit either to form Enhanced Partnerships with bus operators or to work towards service franchising. Some of the funding will support the purchase of zero emission buses under a competitive bidding fund known as ZEBRA. This Strategy states: “We want to ensure that the needs of rural transport users are given equal consideration to those in urban areas”; and “We want improved rural transport to support economic growth and development in rural communities”. [For further information see the RSN's Through a Rural Lens document on the National Bus Strategy.](#)
- Concessionary fares – the national statutory concessionary fares scheme provides free travel on local buses to those aged 65 or over or with a disability (outside peak times). Children up to age 16 are also eligible for free bus travel to school for journeys over 3 miles. Local authorities may fund extensions to the concessionary fares scheme, though this has become less frequent as their budgets have reduced. 17 and 18-year olds are not covered by any statutory scheme, despite now having to remain in education or training.
- Community transport – services run by community transport providers can provide complementary services or routes, typically using minibuses or cars to assist particular groups (such as older people). They often rely on grants and use volunteer drivers to reduce operating costs. In early 2020 the Government announced a £20 million Rural Mobility Fund, offering grants to local projects which will pilot demand-responsive transport solutions in areas where there is a dispersed settlement pattern.
- Future of Transport, Rural Strategy – having completed an urban strategy, the Government has sought evidence prior to producing its rural counterpart. This will seek to ensure that the benefits of transport innovation reach people who live or work in rural areas, covering topics such as transport electrification, automation and real-time data collection. [For further information see the RSN response to this consultation.](#)

- Active travel – the Spending Review 2020 announced that £257 million of investment was being made available in 2021/22 for improvements that will encourage walking and cycling.

The rural dimension

Rural residents travel further than their urban counterparts. Those living in small rural settlements (villages and hamlets) on average travelled 9,756 miles in 2018/19. That is 44% more than the average resident from an urban town or city.¹



Travel times required to reach a workplace or services are typically longer for rural than for urban residents. This time difference is most marked for those who rely upon public transport, as the statistics below for the year 2017 show.²

Average minimum travel time by public transport or walking to reach nearest service or centre

To reach the nearest:	From rural areas	From urban areas
Employment centre (with 5,000+ jobs)	56 minutes	27 minutes
GP surgery	23 minutes	11 minutes
Further education institution	37 minutes	18 minutes

¹ *National Travel Survey 2019* statistics, Department for Transport.

² Travel time statistics 2017 (revised), Department for Transport.

In 2017/18 passengers made 1,223 million journeys by bus in non-metropolitan areas of England, down by 7% since 2009/10.³ Over the same period bus vehicle mileage has remained fairly stable for commercially run services, but has more than halved for local authority subsidised services. What these figures may mask is some operators taking a commercial risk to maintain a service where the subsidy is withdrawn.

This trend coincides with a 43% reduction in local authority expenditure on subsidy for bus services. Several local authorities have cut their supported bus expenditure to zero. Furthermore, local authorities in predominantly rural areas have less funding available to them for spending on bus services (than equivalent urban local authorities).⁴

Budgeted local authority expenditure per resident on bus service provision (2019/20)

Budgeted spend on:	Predominantly rural local authority areas	Predominantly urban local authority areas
Subsidised bus routes	£7.53	£39.41
Concessionary bus fares	£13.84	£25.38

Many bus routes financially supported by local authorities have been withdrawn or reduced.⁵ This is thought to have affected over 3,000 services since 2009. Disaggregated figures for shire areas (alone) are available for 2016/17, showing that:

- 202 services were withdrawn altogether; and
- 191 services were in some other way reduced.

Research in two English regions concluded that many small rural towns were at risk of becoming transport deserts, with infrequent bus, rail, or public transport services. 72 out of 110 small towns in the South West and 20 out of 50 small towns in the North East met the transport desert definition.⁶

Similarly, a survey of (mainly female) rural residents by the National Federation of Women's Institutes found that⁷:

- Only 18% of respondents said they had access to a frequent and reliable bus service;
- Whilst 44% said that their local bus service had been reduced during the last three years; and
- Some 38% of respondents said they do not use the bus due to a lack of services.

Recent analysis has concluded⁸ that £348 million of support funding would now be needed to restore rural bus provision in shire areas back to the level that it was at a decade earlier in 2009/10. Another

³ *The Future of Bus Funding*, Campaign for Better Transport (2019), using Department for Transport statistics.

⁴ Analysis of Local Authority Revenue Account Budget data set, RSN (2020).

⁵ *Buses in Crisis* annual reports, Campaign for Better Transport.

⁶ *Transport Deserts*, CPRE – The Countryside Charity (2020).

⁷ *A New Route for Local Bus Services*, National Federation of Women's Institutes (2021)

⁸ *Reversing the Decline of County Buses*, County Councils Network and County APPG (2020)

recent report concluded – more ambitiously – that an extra £2.7 billion funding per year would enable the provision of an hourly service to every village⁹.

A good half (52%) of all community transport organisations either wholly or mostly serve rural communities.¹⁰ However, those serving rural areas tend to be smaller in scale and have to rely more heavily on fares revenue (as they receive comparatively less grant income).

Policy solutions

The paucity of rural transport options is an issue which strikes at the heart of rural disadvantage, impacting people's access to employment, education and training, health, shops, and a host of other activities. It is a key driver of rural isolation and loneliness. It leaves rural communities highly car dependent, with consequences for the environment and national efforts to reach net zero (for carbon). This situation reflects a long-term lack of strategic policy thinking about what transport provision is needed and appropriate in rural areas.

⁹ *Every village, every hour: A comprehensive bus network for rural England*, CPRE – The Countryside Charity (2021)

¹⁰ *State of the Sector - England*, Community Transport Association (2014).



Rural Transport and Access to Services

Specific policy asks:

Covid-19 support: in the short-term Government must retain its emergency financial support for public transport networks, so that rural bus and rail routes survive whilst pandemic restrictions are in place and whilst passenger confidence remains low. A significant public information campaign is required as soon as social distancing restrictions can be further relaxed to re-assure people about safety and encourage them back onto public transport.

Since the RSN made this ask, the Government has announced that it will continue its emergency funding until no longer needed. Bus operators receiving the funding are expected to work closely with local transport authorities to agree service levels that respond to passenger demand and enable social distancing.

Bus route provision: Government must ensure that its planned National Bus Strategy has objectives for rural provision, with ambitions to better serve rural communities and their economic needs on a sustainable basis. A fair share of the extra resources now starting to flow must reach rural areas, to improve existing routes, restore valued lost routes and establish new routes where clear gaps exist. This must be backed up by ensuring predominantly rural local authorities regain and sustain their ability to offer necessary revenue support, which means Government implementing the findings of its Fair Funding Review and taking full account of the costs of rural service delivery.

Zero emission buses: as described in the section on decarbonisation, the high costs of introducing electric or hydrogen buses and their fuelling facilities could prove problematic in rural areas. The Government's zero emission buses fund (ZEBRA) should target rural areas and a comprehensive review is needed of the electric grid and, where appropriate, hydrogen supply, to address that risk.

Community transport: The Rural Mobility Fund is useful, if modest in its scale. Lessons from that Fund's current round should form the basis for a larger funding pot which is sustained over a longer period. It should, especially, promote the use of community and demand-responsive transport schemes which serve outlying settlements and feed into bus or rail routes. App-based journey planners and booking technologies should be piloted to attract new users, as should through ticketing between transport providers. However, in many rural areas this may require improvements to mobile connectivity.

Cycling and walking: Government should recognise the potential to improve cycling and walking infrastructure in rural towns, to nearby villages and in urban fringe areas. This can reduce car

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dependency and improve access to rural employment, services, and retail centres. Funding streams being made available to develop such infrastructure must reach rural areas and not simply focus on larger urban settlements. The condition of rural roads needs addressing as it can be a barrier to cycling.

Related policy asks appear in the chapter on Decarbonising Rural Communities and Economies.