Going nowhere fast
Impact of inaccessible public transport on wellbeing and social connectedness of older people in England

WRVS 2013
Executive summary

As people age they may no longer feel able to drive, for health or economic reasons. Many older people come to rely on public transport, especially buses and, to a lesser extent, community transport and this report focuses on these particular modes of transport. Transport is a crucial factor in determining older people's ability to access vital amenities and problems with transport provision and the closure of local services exacerbate social exclusion. The Government’s decision to make cuts to key sources of support for both local bus services and community transport has put pressure on fares and service provision for passengers across the country. This will damage the ability of older people to access vital services and live the life they choose.

The England National Travel Concessionary Scheme (ENTCS) allows older people to travel off-peak on buses anywhere in England for free and provides many social, economic and environmental benefits. Research exploring the contribution of free bus travel to quality of later life found that a free bus pass enables holders to ‘justify trips that they could not have justified if there were a cost, but which are of utmost importance to their quality of life’ (Andrews, 2012). However, the benefits of free bus travel are only applicable where there are buses to use. Where bus routes are cut or reduced, many older people find themselves at a disadvantage. WRVS research has shown 14 per cent of older people have seen a reduction in the number of public transport services in their area. This report shows that public transport not only connects people to places but also links people to each other and is a key factor in an inclusive society. WRVS research found that lack of suitable transport has a devastating effect on wellbeing; seven per cent of older people feel lonely because they are unable to get out and about and three per cent feel depressed. This report reveals that older people face many barriers to accessing transport and that considerations of accessibility, safety and affordability are paramount.

WRVS recommends that public transport providers take an age-friendly approach when designing and delivering services to recognise the needs of older people, including training drivers to assist and support older people when they travel and ensuring that bus stops are close to destinations where older people would like to travel. WRVS recommends consulting with older people over planned changes and designs as part of producing an impact assessment.

Access to transport allows older people to remain independent and active in later years and helps people stay connected. Community transport can play a crucial role in helping older people access essential amenities by providing services where public transport cannot or does not, and can provide a vital lifeline for those most vulnerable to isolation and loneliness. WRVS encourages more local authorities to allow the use of concessionary travel passes on community transport. WRVS provides community transport services which can fill the gaps in areas where public transport services are not easily accessible to all.
Methodology

The research was conducted in February 2013 by PCP. PCP conducted the interviews with 300 people aged 75 and over in England and asked them about their experiences of using public and community transport.
4.1 million people in England are over 75 years old\(^1\). The latest projections for England are that there will be 6.8 million people over the age of 75 by 2030, a projected increase of over 248,000 people\(^2\). The ageing population means that there is a continued need to help older people age well and attain a better quality of life. Longer life must be accompanied by continuing opportunities for health, participation and security. The World Health Organization (WHO) has adopted the term ‘active ageing’ to describe the process for achieving this vision (WHO, 2002).

Over time, some people may experience changes to their lifestyle. A number of factors, including health and impairment issues and a wide range of social, cultural and other barriers can impact upon general wellbeing and the ability of older people to leave their homes. Being able to get ‘out and about’ enables people to maintain their wellbeing through accessing goods and essential services, social networks and leisure activities. Social connectedness is considered an important element contributing towards successful ageing. There is evidence that involvement with societal activities has positive outcomes for people in older age; participation and engagement in society is associated with lower mortality, better physical health, fewer depressive symptoms, higher cognitive function and improved subjective wellbeing (Banks, Nazroo, Steptoe et al, 2012).

As people age, they become less likely to travel by private transport, and there is a particular decline in levels of car driving. Transport is often a major problem, particularly in rural areas, impacting on the lives of older people in many ways. A quarter of English households, and nearly 70 per cent of single pensioners have no access to a car and many more people find public transport unaffordable, inaccessible and inappropriate to their needs (Sustrans, 2012). Furthermore, in England, 40 per cent of people feel that the local hospital is one of the most difficult locations to access without a car (DCLG, 2009). Increasingly, as people get older they may no longer feel able to drive, for health or economic reasons. Travel as a car passenger, by bus and by taxi increases with age (Smith, Beckhelling, Ivaldi et al, 2006). In particular, many older people come to rely on public transport, especially buses and, to a lesser extent, community transport to access the community and so this report shall focus on these particular modes of transport. Recent research on wellbeing in older people undertaken as part of ‘Shaping our Age’, a Big Lottery funded project and partnership between WRVS, the Centre for Citizen Participation at Brunel University and the Centre for Social Action at De Montfort University reveals that reliable public and community transport can help overcome barriers to the involvement of excluded older people (Hoban, James, Pattrick, Beresford & Fleming, 2011: 21).

The role of transport as a means to access services is crucial and the ability to travel is a key factor in preventing social exclusion and fostering social connectedness amongst

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\(^1\) ONS 2011 Census

\(^2\) ONS 2011 National population projections, 2010-based statistical bulletin
older people. Increasingly, the loss of some local services, in particular local shops and Post Offices challenges puts more pressure on the need for older people to travel (Sutton & Hill, 2010).

In response to rising costs the funding of bus services in England is undergoing a significant change.

Government announced in the 2010 Spending Review that the rate at which the Bus Service Operators Grant (BSOG) is paid would be cut by 20 per cent from 1st April 2012. In its report on cuts to bus provision in England, the Campaign for Better Buses (2012) found that 41 per cent of local authorities in England made cuts to bus services in 2012. These cuts come on top of the major service reductions made in 2011/12, when one in five council-supported bus services were cut or reduced. The report found that funding was cut by £18.3 million.

Being able to travel is vital to health and wellbeing, and contributes to prolonged independence and continued social inclusion. There are two key documents relating transport and social exclusion in England. The Department for Transport report on social exclusion (2000) reports that people can be socially excluded by transport from the activities they wish to undertake in four ways, spatially – they cannot get there at all; temporally – they cannot get there at the appropriate time; financially – they cannot afford to get there and personally – they lack the mental or physical capabilities to use the available means of mobility. The Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) (2003) report suggests that transport contributes to social inclusion by providing access to work, education, healthcare, food shops, social, cultural and sporting activities (Titheridge, 2004). Research on older people’s experiences and use of public and community transport has therefore become an important topic in sociological and demographic research as well as in the broader socio-political debate.

Travel trends and behaviour

Studies of older people’s travel, and trends in travel for older people have shown that travel declines with age, although older people are travelling more than they were a decade ago (Smith, Beckhelling, Ivaldi et al, 2006). Data from the National Travel Survey (2011) taking into account all modes of transport shows that people over the age of 70 make, in total 215 fewer trips per person per year, than the general population.

National Travel Survey (2011) data shows that people aged 70 and over make the most journeys a year proportionately, using local and non-local buses for 81 trips a year. This is in contrast to the total of 64 bus trips a year for all ages. WRVS research shows that across the sample, 55 per cent of older people use public transport to get out and about; this is the most popular mode of transport selected. This figure is lower for those aged over 85 where proportionately fewer people use public transport.
A qualitative survey of the transport needs and requirements of older people (DfT, 2007) found that travel serves a number of functions for older people, including participation, independence, and social interaction (cf. Sutton & Hill, 2010). National Travel Survey (2011) data shows that people over 70 predominately travel for shopping, personal business, to visit friends or entertainment.

Barriers to travel

Many older people find problems with transport are a barrier to becoming engaged and involved in society and the world outside their home. Inaccessible transport can prevent people from forming social networks, accessing services and taking part in leisure opportunities; it can also prevent people from contributing to society through volunteering, for example. Barriers may be looked at thematically in terms of accessibility, safety and affordability.

Accessibility

Following bus deregulation in England in the 1980s public transport quality and efficiency has declined. The Transport Act 1985 abolished road service licensing in Great Britain, except in London. It replaced the licensing system with a system of registration and removed the duties of local authorities to coordinate public passenger transport in their area. This resulted in bus companies being able to register any service that it chose to operate on a commercial, i.e. unsupported, basis. The local authority could invite tenders for additional routes or journeys if it considered social needs were not met by the commercial services and on condition that it went out to open tender (Butcher, 2010). There is no requirement in the 1985 Act or its consequent regulations for the commercial bus operator to consult before making changes to the timetable and the position of bus stops. The criteria for registration did not include any reference to public demand or to existing services, and objections could no longer be made by other operators or local authorities (Butcher, 2010). In a report on integrating transport planning and older user needs, the Strategic Promotion of Ageing Research Capacity (SPARC) (2008) states that difficulties and barriers older people face with public transport can be overcome through better communication and the involvement of older people in decision making.

In general the bus has a poor public image and is often seen as a poorer alternative to other modes of transport, in particular, the car; slower journey times, unreliability, infrequent services and poor quality of service are all often cited as reasons for not using a bus (JMP, 2009). A consequence of deregulation is that in certain cases, both urban and rural transport services have become fragmented and often services do not link up
properly. In The English Passenger Focus Bus Passenger Satisfaction Survey for 2010/11, respondents stated that they were least satisfied with reliability (buses being on time). Where bus routes are cut or reduced, many older people find themselves disadvantaged. WRVS research shows that 14 per cent of older people have seen a reduction in the number of public transport services in their area.

In Gabriel and Bowling's (2004) examination of quality of life from the perspective of older people, poor public transport was said to have a negative impact on the quality of life of a number of older respondents; some of them said that it was more difficult to get out and about because of inadequate transport, and said that after a difficult journey they were not relaxed and could not enjoy themselves. Research has shown that older people would like to be able to engage in more activities more often (DfT, 2001). The most frequently mentioned forgone activities concern family visits and meeting with friends. Transport difficulties were mentioned most often as the principle barrier to taking part in these activities by older people aged 80 and over. A number of transport difficulties were cited, including: transport is unreliable; transport service is not available/infrequent; and having to face a difficult journey. These findings demonstrate that many older people are not as active as they wish to be and they face restrictions in getting out and about. This can be seen to have a negative impact on wellbeing; Bannister and Bowling (2004) argue that there is a positive link between quality of life and the number of activities that individuals participate in (Su, 2007). WRVS research shows five per cent of older people who are unable to get out and about due to lack of suitable transport feel frustrated and five per cent feel isolated.

Recent years have seen growing recognition that access to transport is an important determinant of health. In particular, The Marmot Review (2010) states that local planning can ‘encourage community participation and cohesion by providing accessible transport and well located services, and make it easier for people to pursue healthy lifestyles by promoting active travel’. In its review on healthy transport, the British Medical Association (BMA) reports that public transport has a role in helping individuals to achieve recommended levels of daily physical activity, and has health-related benefits. This is because ‘public transport typically incorporates physical activity as a component of the journey, increasing the likelihood that individuals will meet physical activity recommendations for walking’ (BMA, 2012). Transport is needed to ‘access health services; the goods necessary for health…and the social networks that foster a healthy life’ (Jones, Goodman, Roberts et al, 2012:1). However, problems arise when people have difficulties accessing those services necessary for health and the Audit Commission, in its report ‘Going Places’, finds significant numbers of older people face difficulties in getting to health centres, dentists and hospitals (Audit Commission, 2001).

Physical health appears to be a dominant factor that affects transport choice and use. The DfT research into the travel needs, behaviour and aspirations of people in later life identified the most dominant factor affecting transport use is health status rather
than age (DfT, 2007). The study revealed a range of conditions that were related to ageing and which affected respondents’ use and experience of transport and travel. A key health problem that impacted on people’s use of transport related to conditions affecting personal mobility, including arthritis, spinal injuries, knee and hip problems, and circulatory conditions such as deep vein thrombosis. Increased tiredness and loss of stamina were also widely reported. Other health problems such as bowel conditions and incontinence were reported to also affect travel, because of the need to have access to toilet facilities, which also impacts upon use of public transport (DfT, 2007). Older people with mobility problems may also feel less confident when travelling on public transport; particularly on overcrowded buses as they worry they may have to stand. Research carried out by Transport for London (TfL, 2009) reveals that a lack of seats on over-crowded buses may lead to physical discomfort, exhaustion and anxiety about falling and that in some cases older people have had falls which they attribute to ‘jerky movements that can cause them to lose balance’. In particular, participants mention that bus drivers sometimes start the bus moving before they have a chance to get a seat, which has caused some to suffer falls. This is of great concern; WRVS research on falls in England has shown that 21 per cent of respondents who had suffered a fall in the last five years lost their confidence as a result, with 17 per cent saying nothing can help them regain it (WRVS 2012).

The presence of chronic illness and disability increases significantly with age and 19 per cent of older people in the English Study (ELSA) report that they have a longstanding illness that prevents them from shopping or makes it difficult for them (Age UK, 2012, ELSA wave 3). Difficulties arise not only in accessing transport, for example, where older people have difficulty or are unable to walk to the nearest bus stop but also in carrying heavy shopping bags from supermarket or shop, to the bus stop, onto the bus, and back home at the other end.

Safety

The Public Service Vehicle Accessibility Regulations (PSVAR) (2000) focused on ensuring that all new bus and coach public transport vehicles must be physically accessible to disabled people, including wheelchair users. Specifically these rules related to the design and layout of buses to include slip-resistant floors designated disabled spaces and handrails. Buses are becoming more accessible, and modern low floor buses with ramps enable wheelchair users to board, although not all are wheelchair accessible yet. Various companies around the UK are utilising ‘talking bus’ technologies and some buses now also have audio visual information systems on board (DPTAC, 2012). However, despite these changes, WRVS research finds that public transport is often not very accessible to people with impairments or disability and 17 per cent of older people said that public transport is not accessible for their disabilities.
Data from the National Travel Survey (2011) shows a significant difference in trips between those with and those without mobility difficulties. Passengers with disabilities make fewer trips on average and the difference is greater the older one gets. Older passengers with mobility difficulties who find it hard to walk often experience problems accessing buses. Respondents in the DfT travel needs and behaviour research (2007) reported that walking, sometimes even a short distance, to a bus stop was extremely difficult and frequently painful. WRVS research shows that 18 per cent of respondents can’t manage the walk to / from the public transport service they want to use and nine per cent report that the nearest public transport service they want to use is too far away.

Community transport typically describes the provision of non-profit making transport for the many people who may live miles from the nearest bus route, are unable to afford taxi fares or are physically unable to use the public transport services provided. There are at least 2,000 community transport organisations operating across England: nearly one-third of them are based in rural areas. The sector provides 15 million plus passenger journeys each year (CTA, 2012). Community transport operators range from small local organisations serving a specific community to larger social enterprises delivering commercial contracts such as bus routes, and health and social services transport, which help to sustain vital community transport services (CTA, 2012). Typically, community transport schemes are set up where communities have limited public transport options and people within those communities decided to set up services themselves to address local needs. Perhaps as a consequence, services vary considerably from area to area and differ according to need. They can include community bus schemes, community car schemes, minibuses and door-to-door (dial-a-ride) schemes.

Community transport schemes are financed in different ways and depend on a number of different funding streams including BSOG and local authority grants and discretionary grants made by parish, town and district councils. Many community transport organisations have been affected by the 20 per cent reduction in BSOG from April 2012. At the same time as BSOG reductions, community transport schemes have also been affected by spending cuts from local authorities and over 70 per cent of local authorities have moved rapidly to reduce funding for supported bus services (House of Commons Transport Committee Review, 2011). In 2011, the DfT set up the Supporting Community Transport Fund; so far this fund has allocated £20 million to 76 local authorities outside London. This was accompanied by guidance to local authorities to help them ‘get the most out of community transport’ (DfT, 2012).

The growing role of community transport should be recognised. Community transport schemes are of vital importance where the public transport system does not fully serve the needs of older people in the area. They not only connect people to essential services but they also provide a link to the community and enable people to foster social connections. WRVS research shows eight per cent of older people use community transport as a means to get out and about and a further six per cent said that they would like to use community transport services but do not know anything about them.
Affordability

The English National Concessionary Bus Travel Scheme is a national scheme by the Department for Transport in conjunction with local authorities across England. The scheme extended the provision of free bus travel within individual local authorities to allow travel throughout England from 1 April 2008. Since April 2010, the age of eligibility for concessionary travel in England has been tied to the pensionable age for women. Older people and eligible disabled people are provided with free off-peak bus travel on weekdays and all day at weekends and Bank Holidays.

Some local authorities offer discretionary concessions over and above the statutory minimum. Examples of the types of discretionary concessions local authorities may offer include companion passes for those who are unable to travel alone; free travel on other modes of transport where buses are limited or scarce, for example community transport; and an extension to the time restriction to allow travel in peak periods.

In 2011/12 there were around 9.8 million older and disabled concessionary bus passes in England, with an average of 109 bus journeys per pass per year (DfT, 2012b). Around 9 million (92 per cent) of passes in 2011/12 were for older people, corresponding to 80 passes per hundred eligible older persons. Data from the ONS Omnibus Opinions Survey (2011) shows that since the introduction of the concessionary pass, 43 per cent of people aged 75 and over use the bus more often. The National Travel survey (2011) reveals that the take-up rate of the concessionary travel pass in Britain has increased year on year to 79 per cent in 2011 (82% of females and 76% of males).
This study has shown that England will see a dramatic demographic shift within the coming decades and there is a real need to examine how current and future older people can lead fuller, healthier lives. The ability to get out and about is a central component to quality of life, especially in maintaining connections with friends and families, and accessing health, shopping and leisure facilities.

In this report we see that older people with mobility problems feel less confident travelling on public transport. Issues mentioned include lack of seats on buses, over-crowding and inconsiderate drivers. Initial steps to make services more ‘age friendly’ could include ensuring that drivers are friendly and helpful and that buses are more frequent, thus reducing the issues of overcrowding and a shortage of seats and the problem of irregular services. Public transport providers and local authorities need to understand the needs of older passengers, and bus services and design need to be more inclusive by taking the needs of older people into account (Marsden, Cattan, Jopson and Woodward, 2008). WRVS recommends that older people be consulted and involved with planned changes and design of public transport services as part of producing an impact assessment, as any changes will directly affect them and their travel choices. This will allow individuals to be seen as citizens and not just consumers, and provides a clear opportunity for older people to exercise choice and control in their lives; this is particularly important as 14 per cent of our sample do not feel able to make comments or complaints about local services.

The policy of free concessionary bus fares for older and disabled people has proved to be popular and this report finds that since the introduction of the scheme older people use the bus more often, and the take-up rate of the concessionary travel pass has increased year-on-year. The top objectives of the older and disabled national concessionary fares policy were to reduce social exclusion in older people and to ‘ensure that bus travel, in particular, remains within the means of those on limited incomes and those who have mobility difficulties’ (DfT, 2008; cited by Andrews, Parkhurst, Susilo & Shaw, 2012). The House of Commons Transport Committee Review report on ‘Bus services after the spending review’ (2011) found that the concessionary fares scheme is highly valued by users and that it provides a number of social, economic and environmental benefits. WRVS believes that the national bus concession should remain in place which is the Government policy of this Parliament. However, a policy of means testing the statutory concession, so that wealthier older people will not be eligible has been speculated on but at the time of the report, no-one has yet committed to such a policy.

Community transport can play a crucial role in helping older people access essential services by providing services where public transport cannot or does not; and can provide a vital lifeline for those most vulnerable to isolation and loneliness. At present not all older people who use community transport are able to use their concessionary travel passes. WRVS welcomes the DfT’s decision to allocate special funding to local authorities to encourage the growth of community transport in their area and agrees that it is a welcome admission of the need for targeted funding, after the department withdrew several ring-fenced transport funds on the basis that local authorities should choose their own priorities.

Summary
Recommendations

• There should be a requirement on bus companies to carry out an impact assessment into the effect on older people (and their carers) of any changes to bus services. This would allow individuals to be seen as citizens and not just consumers and provides a clear opportunity for older people to exercise choice and control in their lives.

• Public transport needs to be accessible to older people e.g., height, number of steps etc – bus and public transport operators and local authorities need to work together to achieve an ‘age friendly’ integrated transport system which will take into account access and safety considerations.

• Ensure that bus stops are close to departure points and destinations where older people would like to travel from and travel to.

• Public transport providers should be obliged to provide training which takes into account older people’s requirements; to ensure drivers are friendly and helpful.

• Local authorities should provide additional financial support to community transport schemes to allow concessionary card holders to travel at no personal cost.

• More awareness and information should be provided by local authorities on community transport schemes.

• Universal concessionary travel is regarded as important in keeping people socially engaged and should be retained.
Conclusion

WRVS believes that transport plays a vital role in improving the lives of older people in Scotland. This report has found that both public and community transport provide a vital service which allows people to remain active and independent as they age. We believe that the key to social connectedness and an active life is accessible transport to help people get out and about as they grow older; this will enable older people to live healthy, active and independent in line with the vision of the National Service Framework (NSF), for older people and the wellbeing agenda.

WRVS provides community transport services where public transport system do not fully serve the needs of older people in the area. WRVS also provides services such as Good Neighbours and befriending schemes which can transport clients to and from their chosen destination, provide help with shopping, collecting prescriptions, going on outings or simply provide company at home.
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