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

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 to access the community. 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 Welsh 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 concessionary travel scheme in Wales allows older people aged 60 and over to travel at all times on buses anywhere in Wales for free and provides many social, economic and environmental benefits. Research from the Older People’s Commissioner (2010) has found that concessionary travel helps older people to retain their independence and remain connected to society. 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 17 per cent of older people in Wales 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; four per cent of older people feel lonely because they are unable to get out and about and four 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.

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 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 Wales.
Background

Nearly 262,000 people in Wales are over 75 years old. The latest projections for Wales are that there will be 431,000 people over the age of 75 by 2030, a projected increase of 169,000 people. Wales has the highest proportion of older people of any nation or standardised region within the UK, a trend that is projected to continue in the coming decades (Institute of Welsh Affairs, 2012). The ageing population means that there is a continued need to help older people age well and attain a better quality of life. 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. A quarter of households in Wales (over 300,000) already have no car, including half of all lone parents and two thirds of single pensioners, and many more people find public transport unaffordable, inaccessible and inappropriate to their needs. Furthermore, one in four people in Wales feel that the local hospital is one of the most difficult locations to access via local bus services. Among households without a car in Wales, two-fifths describe the local bus service as failing to meet their needs for travel to the town centre or the shops (Sustrans, 2012). 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).

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1 ONS 2011 Census

2 ONS 2011 National population projections, 2010-based statistical bulletin
The role of transport as a means of accessing services is crucial and the ability to travel is a key factor in preventing social exclusion and fostering social connectedness amongst older people. Increasingly, the loss of some local services, in particular local shops and Post Offices means more older people have to travel to access vital amenities (Sutton & Hill, 2010).

In response to rising costs the funding of bus services in Wales is undergoing a significant change. In 2012, the previous Minister for Transport in the Welsh Government initiated a review of bus and community transport services that receive funding support. Following the review a new bus funding regime will be in place from 1st April 2013. The new Regional Transport Services Grant (RTSG) is a £25m single funding scheme that will replace the former Bus Services’ Operators Grant (BSOG) and the Local Transport Services Grant (LTSG), which were sources of support to both local bus services and community transport. This is a new allocation which amounts to 25 per cent less funding than last year’s equivalent.

A study on Welsh concessionary travel reported that a ‘progressively reducing rate of reimbursement for local bus operators may lead to the deregistering of some commercial bus journeys and changes in service patterns (e.g. lower frequencies and shorter operating hours)’ (Older People’s Commissioner for Wales, 2010:7). Being able to travel is vital to health and wellbeing, and contributes to prolonged independence and continued social inclusion. Transport is often a major problem, particularly in rural areas, impacting on the lives of older people in many ways. Lack of accessible transport or problems with cost, reliability or ‘fit’ with planned journeys acts as a barrier to participating in activities, whether these are social or shopping trips, or hospital appointments (Age Cymru, 2012). Research on older people’s experience 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 in England and Wales (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 Wales 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 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
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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. Findings from the Welsh Passenger Survey (2010), though broadly positive and the majority of respondents were satisfied with their journey, reported that there was scope for improvement with passengers’ satisfaction associated with the wait at the bus stop. The report also found problems with accessibility in many areas where older people struggle to access safe, frequent and reliable public transport (WAG, 2010). Where bus routes are cut or reduced, many older people find themselves disadvantaged. WRVS research shows that 17 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 in England and Wales 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 four per cent feel isolated.

Recent years have seen growing recognition that access to transport is an important determinant of health. In its review on healthy transport, the British Medical Association (BMA) reports that public transport has a role in helping individuals 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). 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 Department for Transport research into the travel needs, behaviour and aspirations of people in later life in England and Wales identified the most dominant factor affecting transport use is the level of physical health 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 had an impact 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 (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 Wales has shown that 19 per cent of respondents who had suffered a fall in the last five years lost their confidence as a result, with 14 per cent saying nothing can help them regain it (WRVS 2012).

The presence of chronic illness and disability increases significantly with age and 44 per cent of older people in Wales reported having a limiting long-term illness or disability (Statistics for Wales, 2011). For many this will result in a reduced ability to complete normal activities of daily living and a limited ability to shop (Jones, Duffy, Coull & Wilkinson, 2009). 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
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these changes, WRVS research finds that public transport is often not very accessible to people with impairments or disability and nearly 11 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 nearly 20 per cent of older people can’t manage the walk to / from the public transport service they want to use and 12 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. The sector provides over 1.2 million passenger journeys each year (CTA, 2010). 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, 2010). 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.

From 2005, The Community Transport Concessionary Fares Initiative enabled the use of concessionary fares on 15 community transport schemes in Wales. This initiative was piloted to enable severely disabled people who may be unable to access low floor bus services, and those who are socially disadvantaged to use specific community transport at no personal cost by using their concessionary bus pass. The aim of establishing the 15 demonstration projects was to test and evaluate the practicability, cost and relative value for money of community transport schemes providing limited access to free travel for this client group. The information gathered was intended to assist the Welsh Government in considering the potential for funding an expansion of such schemes on a more widespread basis in future (CTA Wales). The Community Transport Concessionary Fares Initiative was due to end on 31 March 2012; however in February 2012 Welsh Ministers announced that they had agreed to maintain funding for the Community Transport Concessionary Fares Initiative to allow officials to carry out an evaluation of the 15 projects. The evaluation of the projects has now been completed. A decision was
made not to roll the scheme out across Wales and funding for the initiative is scheduled to end on 12 April 2013.

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 concessionary travel scheme, in operation in Wales since 2002, provides free local bus travel for older and disabled people that meet the eligibility criteria and are resident in Wales. The concessionary bus pass scheme is open to people aged 60 and over, and disabled people who are resident in Wales. The concessionary bus pass can be used at any time of day. Welsh pass holders are able to use cross-border services if their bus journey starts or ends in Wales (Welsh Government, 2011).

The scheme has proved enormously popular in Wales, with local authorities managing in excess of 650,000 passes annually (Older People’s Commissioner for Wales, 2010). In a survey of bus pass use in Wales it was found that three quarters of the sample used their pass more than once a week. Frequency of use was higher among respondents interviewed in urban locations and among respondents who did not own a car. The total number of passes in circulation has increased by over 50 per cent between 2002-03 and 2010-11 (National Assembly for Wales, 2011). Data from the ONS Omnibus Opinions Survey which summarises people’s experiences and attitudes towards bus travel in Great Britain (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).

The Community Transport Association (CTA) believes that the concessionary travel scheme should be extended to cover community transport. Research by Sustrans has outlined what could be achieved for older people if priorities were readjusted. They have said that the restoration of Welsh transport grants to pre-cut levels would cost £9m (equivalent to the cost of building 0.5 miles of road), and would be of benefit to 1.5 million people (of which 660,000 are regular users). Meanwhile, the estimated cost of enabling elderly and disabled passengers to access concessionary fares on community transport (currently provided through the CTCFI) is approximately £3.9 million per year (equivalent to 323 metres of road) (Sustrans, 2012).
This study has shown that Wales 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, overcrowding and inconsiderate drivers. Initial steps to make services more ‘age friendly’ could include ensuring that drivers are considerate 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 should understand the needs of older passengers, and bus services and design ought 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 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 23 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 Older People’s Commissioner’s review into the impact of the concessionary bus travel scheme on older people in Wales found that without the concessionary bus pass many older people would be housebound and denied access to essential facilities which enable them to maintain their independence, and that the scheme offers older people the opportunity to remain integrated in society (Older People’s Commissioner for Wales, 2010). WRVS believes that the national bus concession should remain in place for all those who are currently eligible; a policy of means testing the statutory concession, so that wealthier older people will not be eligible has been speculated 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. WRVS is concerned that the end of the Community Transport Fares Initiative will mean the end of vital services for older people and will leave them stranded. The Welsh Government should make community transport a priority and we believe that local authorities should provide financial support for community transport; this can be achieved through the extension to the grant to local authorities (previously the Local Transport Services Grant) which has to be spent on community transport.
Recommendations

1 The Welsh Government should consider increasing the proportion of transport grants which must be spent on community transport schemes.

2 Currently, the Public Transport Users’ Committee for Wales (PTUC) contains one place to represent the interest of passengers with disabilities. We would call for the creation of an additional place on the Committee for an Older People’s Champion to ensure that age-friendly considerations (such as access and safety) are at the heart of transport planning. We would also like to see a similar position created at Passenger Focus so that older passengers have a UK-wide voice on transport issues.

3 The Welsh Government should impose a requirement on bus companies in Wales 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.
Conclusion

WRVS believes that transport plays a vital role in improving the lives of older people in Wales. 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 promote both social inclusion and independent living, in line with the aims of the Strategy for Older People in Wales.

In Wales, WRVS has over 3,000 volunteers in around 150 services right across the country. 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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