Social Impacts and Equity in Transport

Policy Briefing Note 5: Connectivity of Rural Communities

Key Issues

- In the UK there is a diversity of rurality, with varying degrees of remoteness and connectivity. This can create difficulties in terms of understanding problems of connectivity and developing transferable solutions, particularly in a political context of increasingly devolved decision making.
- When seeking to address issues of rural connectivity a ‘trilemma’ involving the factors of cost, coverage and quality is faced. It is possible to achieve any two of these factors, but at the expense of the third e.g. you can provide a low cost, high quality solution, but the range of coverage would then be poor.
- Providing connectivity to rural communities presents significant challenges because they often face problems of transport poverty and digital exclusion. Alongside social and economic aspects, these problems include a strong technological/technical component common to both the transport and digital spheres in terms of the quality and availability of infrastructure and services.
- Prevailing methods of appraisal such as conventional cost-benefit analysis do not effectively capture and value the social benefits of interventions designed to promote rural connectivity e.g. how do we value the economic and social benefit of a community transport system which helps sustain independent living versus the costs of residential care or hospitalisation?
- There is considerable potential for land use planning to better support the connectivity and sustainability of rural communities through better location of facilities and services.

Policy Priorities Emerging from the Workshop

1. A localism policy agenda for rural communities requires a clear strategic lead from central government with a consistent policy framework, minimum, enforceable standards of provision and a transparent evaluation process. This will enable action at the local community level which is accountable. Local authorities are responding very differently to cuts and there is a lack of awareness of different approaches being taken and their impacts.
2. Rural communities can be dependent upon fragile transport infrastructure and services due to funding uncertainties and dependence upon volunteers. System failure may lead to transport poverty with significant social and economic implications. We need to evaluate the resilience and reliability of rural transport networks and identify means of mitigating vulnerabilities.
3. The potential for the digital economy to support the connectivity of rural communities remains poorly understood and the digital divide between urban and rural communities may grow without policy intervention. Particular areas of concern relate to the costs and benefits of providing services via telepresence and the role of data collection and sharing in supporting evidence based policy making.
4. When considering policy interventions to support rural connectivity we need to move away from a conventional Cost Benefit Analysis appraisal to a more socially inclusive indicator set which effectively considers and values the social return on investment.
5. The potential development of multi-functional village hubs as consolidation centres for co-located services (public sector services, internet connectivity, shops, fuel, car clubs, freight/delivery collection points, etc.) should be explored along with associated regulatory, commercial and social issues.
Connectivity of Rural Communities Workshop Summary

1. Introduction to Workshop 4

This Policy Briefing Note concerns the fourth workshop in a series aiming to promote interdisciplinary collaboration and capacity building; to better equip researchers, policymakers and practitioners across the different social science and transport disciplines to address the social challenges of providing transport and access, and to maximise the social benefits of the transport system within the UK context, now and in the future. This workshop is part of a series of themed events designed to explore various theoretical, policy and practical aspects of transport, social equity and social impacts of transport through a number of themed events.

The fourth workshop explored Transport and the Connectivity of Rural Communities. It brought together non-transport professionals from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds but all with interests in rural communities and their connectivity, as well as representatives from central and local government and relevant NGOs, alongside transport professionals including transport operators. The idea was to bring together different perspectives, knowledge and experiences to generate discussion on the key issues and trends, and skills and policy needs, around this complex issue of how transport affects the connectivity of rural communities.

2. Background to linking transport with the connectivity of rural communities

Policy Briefing Note 1 from the Two-Day Framing Event sets out the background to the Workshop Series’ concerns with social impact and social equity. With respect to transport and the connectivity of rural communities, the key points identified were:

- The transport system overwhelmingly benefits car drivers, and public transport is predominantly designed to facilitate commuting to key urban centres.
- Public transport services are generally less frequent and less reliable in rural areas. Evening, late night and weekend services are also often unavailable in these areas. The cost of public transport fares is also high relative to people’s income.
- Links between transport and gentrification or neighbourhood decline in rural areas.
- There is little sign of travel distance per person plateauing out in rural areas, as seems to be the case elsewhere. Car ownership is high and still growing with the majority of those on low incomes having cars. The social issues are not so much about a lack of transport, but the need for a large amount of travel and the cost of this for households on low incomes.

3. Workshop 4: Connectivity of rural communities

Workshop Four was hosted by the Centre for Transport Research at the University of Aberdeen on Monday 3rd and Tuesday 4th October 2011. Workshop participants came from a wide range of academic disciplines and policy areas and included representatives of local government, central government departments and NGOs.

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1 A full report of this workshop as well as presentation materials and information about the rest of the seminar series can be found at http://www.tsu.ox.ac.uk/research/uktrcse/
3.1 Key aims and objectives

Workshop 4 examined the enormous social challenges of supporting the connectivity of rural communities. Workshop participants were encouraged to interpret connectivity broadly. Clearly transport planning and provision in rural areas and the impact of this on the exclusion of vulnerable groups is a key aspect of connectivity. However, connectivity also incorporates a range of other issues (including, but not exclusively) economic, social, political and technological factors, each of which has implications for rural transport and accessibility. Participants were also encouraged to consider connectivity over a range of spatial scales from the internal connectivity of individual rural communities to their relationship with neighbouring rural communities as well as with urban centres and connectivity at the local, regional and national level.

A set of key themes were developed to be explored at the workshop through both presentations and discussion sessions:

1. Rural accessibility and social exclusion
2. The dynamics of deprivation
3. The role of transport in the future sustainability of rural communities
4. Sectoral integration of policies in rural communities
5. The potential for a digital economy and virtual transportation to improve rural connectivity

3.2 Speakers

- Mark Shucksmith (Professor of Planning, Newcastle University) *An overview of rural accessibility*
- Rachel Milne (General Manager, Buchan Dial-a-Community Bus) *Community provision for rural connectivity: the challenges and opportunities of providing a community transport service in rural areas*
- Noel Smith (Director of the Centre for Research in Social Policy, Loughborough University) *Establishing a Rural Minimum Income Standard (Rural MIS): the Role of Transport*
- Haydn Davies (Localism and Rural Transport Policy Lead, Department for Transport) *The challenges of connecting rural communities - a policy perspective*
- John Nelson (Professor of Transport Studies and Director of the Centre for Transport Research, University of Aberdeen) *Transport poverty meets the Digital Divide: accessibility and connectivity in rural communities*

3.3 Workshop outputs

A workshop report, this policy briefing note and slides of all the workshop presentations can be downloaded from the UKTRC website: http://www.tsu.ox.ac.uk/research/uktrcse/. The project will also produce a final report in December 2011 and a Special Issue of the Journal of Transport Geography in spring 2012.
4. Discussion of research and policy themes

On the basis of the presentations and discussion sessions, the following key themes were identified:

4.1 What (and who) is the countryside for?

It was suggested that the major policy imperative in the UK in relation to rural communities reflected an ecologist, preservationist interpretation of sustainability. This was seen to be at the expense of socio-economic, inter-generational sustainability. This was seen to have led to a planning strategy that limited development (particularly housing) in rural areas, such that gentrification had led to the poor being priced out of rural living. This strategy was not viewed as sustainable in terms of supporting the rural (agricultural) economy and had serious implications for transport poverty as the prevalent culture of car dependence in rural living increased social exclusion for those without access to the car and unable to access diminishing or non-existent public transport services. In this context, housing and development policy was seen to be a crucial determinant of rural connectivity.

4.2 The cost of connectivity in diverse rural communities

The diversity of rurality in the UK, with varying degrees of remoteness and connectivity can create difficulties in terms of understanding problems of connectivity and developing transferable solutions, particularly in a political context of increasingly devolved decision making. However, research on Minimum Income Standards in rural England has demonstrated that most rural households face a minimum cost of living of the order of 10 to 20 per cent higher than their counterparts in urban areas. These costs are concentrated in two particular areas of household budgets – transport and domestic fuel. Transport costs make up the single largest element of the additional costs – between 60 and 100 per cent of differences. Given the greater connectivity challenges faced by many rural communities elsewhere in the UK, it is likely that the differential in cost of living is considerably higher.

4.3 Is localism compatible with joined up thinking?

A call for joined up thinking underpinned many of the research and policy priorities generated at the workshop (particularly in relation to service delivery). It was suggested that this approach conflicts with the prevailing localism policy agenda and model of governance based on decentralisation and fragmentation. Rural communities require a clear strategic lead from central government with a consistent policy framework, minimum, enforceable standards of provision and a transparent evaluation process. This will enable action at the local community level which is accountable. Local authorities are responding very differently to cuts and there is a lack of awareness of different approaches being taken and their impacts. Open data and best practice knowledge transfer are critically important in this context.

4.4 How resilient are rural transport networks?

Rural communities can be dependent upon fragile transport infrastructure and services. This relates to the vulnerability of commercial transport services, the uncertainty of funding for community transport and the reliance upon local champions and volunteers to sustain services. We need to better understand the vulnerability of transport networks in rural areas and consider how they could be made more resilient.
4.5 What are the costs and benefits of delivering services via telepresence?

Advances in the digital economy have enabled an ever increasing range of services to be provided by telepresence in rural areas. The social implications of these opportunities in terms of inclusion and service quality remain unclear (see Section 5.2). We need also to better understand if there is added economic value of teleworking in rural communities. Microbusinesses in rural areas have been enabled by developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and these offer diversification opportunities for agricultural communities and act as incubators for rural business.

4.6 How can new data sources be best exploited?

Advances in the availability and range of data sources brought by the digital economy (open data, data sharing, crowd sourcing, etc.) offer the prospect of better identifying and responding to connectivity needs in rural communities and a better understanding of interactions between social networks, transport networks and social inclusion. This arena would also benefit from a strategic approach to (geo coded) data collection, open data sharing, greater appreciation of issues surrounding data provenance, and knowledge transfer to support evidence based policy making, action taking and outcome evaluation.

4.7 How can the social benefits of rural connectivity services be better valued?

When considering policy interventions to support rural connectivity we need to move away from a conventional Cost Benefit Analysis appraisal to a more socially inclusive indicator set which effectively considers and values the social return on investment in terms of quality of life, well being and the wider social costs/benefits of transport interventions.

4.8 Can land use planning enable more sustainable rural form?

The potential development of multi-functional village hubs as consolidation centres for co-located services (public sector services, internet connectivity, shops, fuel, car clubs, freight/delivery collection points, etc.) should be further explored along with associated regulatory, commercial and social issues. The lack of a robust evidence base on sustainable rural form (see Section 5.2) is a major associated deficiency.

4.9 Reviewing funding models for public transport

It was widely agreed that a fundamental review of the funding model for public transport was needed. In particular, a review of policy on concessionary fares was advocated in terms of its purpose, effectiveness and fairness. It was widely felt that maximum benefit for public transport users was not being achieved from the money invested through the current funding model. It was argued that planning and funding whole transport networks based on an holistic needs based approach was desirable. Greater focus on alternative forms of flexible shared transport (lift sharing, car clubs, shared taxis etc) is also required.

4.10 Achieving social connectivity

Social capital and social connectivity were raised as important issues linked to shared knowledge and shared ownership of resources. Rural communities often have a well defined sense of shared experience leading to a strong sense of connectedness. Within rural areas, residents have a reduced
ability to choose who they interact with. This lack of choice can act as a way of connecting the community as it is in everyone’s interest for there to be harmony. Further investigation into the importance of and interaction between social capital, transport networks and social networks in rural areas is needed. The relationships may not be implicit e.g. some accessible rural areas can suffer from higher levels of social exclusion than remote rural areas especially for the elderly, as friends are forced out by house prices and social networks are lost.

5. Methodologies, gaps in knowledge and future priorities

5.1 Methodologies

- The utility of establishing a rural minimum income standard and its deployment of Citizen’s Juries - a participatory action research method was a major focus of the workshop. The potential roll-out of this approach to rural contexts across the UK was identified as a future priority.
- Methodologies for the appraisal of transport interventions were a key aspect of workshop discussion with better incorporation of social metrics (see Section 4.6) and the need to reconsider existing funding models for rural transport (Section 4.9) being high research and policy priorities.
- Social network analysis was identified as a key methodological tool that was emerging and had significant potential in the field of rural connectivity
- Advances in the availability and range of data sources brought by the digital economy (open data, data sharing, crowd sourcing, etc.) offered considerable research opportunities and challenges.
- An increasing role for visual methodologies (with parallel advances in analytical techniques) was anticipated.

5.2 Gaps in knowledge

- The importance of freight and related goods movement in supporting rural connectivity was identified as a neglected area. It was felt that advances in the digital economy offered considerable potential to improve service provision and indeed to better integrate freight and passenger movements in rural areas. Research evidence on tracing goods distribution and the delivery implications of online purchasing was available, but it was almost wholly focussed on urban areas.
- Whilst there was an established international evidence base on the sustainable urban form, a parallel evidence base on sustainable rural form does not exist.
- A better evidence base on accessibility interventions was identified as a key knowledge gap that needed to be addressed to inform strategy and investment decisions.
- Partnership working was strongly advocated in workshop discussions. What have been the outcomes from successful partnership working that justify the faith in this approach? Work is needed to evaluate experience of partnership working with international examples - are issues centrally or locally driven? What are the drivers on the ground to collaboration?
- The transport and social equity impacts of Information and Communication Technologies are still not clearly understood. This is due to a number of factors including:
  - The lack of unified analysis; research is undertaken in many diverse domains, but findings have not been effectively consolidated
  - Whilst the evidence base is growing, findings are inconsistent in terms of travel impacts and social benefits
Findings suggest impacts are varied and context dependent and the subject would clearly benefit from longitudinal analysis at a national scale.

5.3 Future priorities

The following five future priorities have been identified based on the presentations and discussion at the workshop:

1. A localism policy agenda for rural communities requires a clear strategic lead from central government with a consistent policy framework, minimum, enforceable standards of provision and a transparent evaluation process. This will enable action at the local community level which is accountable. Local authorities are responding very differently to cuts and there is a lack of awareness of different approaches being taken and their impacts.

2. Rural communities can be dependent upon fragile transport infrastructure and services due to funding uncertainties and dependence upon volunteers. System failure may lead to transport poverty with significant social and economic implications. We need to evaluate the resilience and reliability of rural transport networks and identify means of mitigating vulnerabilities.

3. The potential for the digital economy to support the connectivity of rural communities remains poorly understood and the digital divide between urban and rural communities may grow without policy intervention. Particular areas of concern relate to the costs and benefits of providing services via telepresence and the role of data collection and sharing in supporting evidence based policy making.

4. When considering policy interventions to support rural connectivity we need to move away from a conventional Cost Benefit Analysis appraisal to a more socially inclusive indicator set which effectively considers and values the social return on investment.

5. The potential development of multi-functional village hubs as consolidation centres for co-located services (public sector services, internet connectivity, shops, fuel, car clubs, freight/delivery collection points, etc.) should be explored along with associated regulatory, commercial and social issues.

For more information about the topics covered in this workshop please contact Mark Beecroft, Centre for Transport Research, University of Aberdeen (m.beecroft@abdn.ac.uk). For details of the workshop series and wider project please contact Karen Lucas, Transport Studies Unit at the University of Oxford (Karen.Lucas@ouce.ox.ac.uk).