

State of Rural Services 2016: Local Buses and Community Transport



Summary

This report is a review of the most recent evidence about the provision of local bus services and community transport in rural England.

It finds that rural residents travel longer distances and spend more time travelling than their urban counterparts.

They are more likely to own a car and make journeys by car. The clearest (rural-urban) difference is found among low income households, with those living in rural areas being 70% more likely to have access to a car. This is symptomatic of a lack of alternative transport options.

In 2012 86% of households in rural towns and 49% of households in smaller rural settlements had access to a regular bus service. This is an improvement on the position a decade earlier, though by 2012 (the latest year for this data) that upward trend had stalled.

Over the last decade, another trend is that more buses now run on a commercial basis and fewer receive local authority funding support. Across non-metropolitan (or shire) areas that support was cut by 8% in the last financial year and by almost 25% over the last four years.

Monitoring during 2015/16 identified 124 local bus services that were withdrawn altogether and 248 that were reduced or otherwise altered (this time across the whole of England). The largest cuts were in shire areas.

In rural areas the number of passengers using local buses grew in the years prior to 2008/09. That number then stayed fairly constant for a few years, before declining somewhat by 2014/15. This reversal of the trend coincides with bus service reductions.

A similar pattern is evident for concessionary bus travel (mainly by pensioners). In this case the earlier growth and more recent decline is quite marked, probably due to expansion of the statutory concessionary fare scheme in 2008 and recent rises in the state pension age.

Latest (2011/12) figures for community transport schemes show that a third of them operate in rural areas, where they carried 8 million passengers. However, schemes in rural areas tend to be small-scale, as well as being more dependent on fare revenue and less reliant on grants than urban schemes.

Assessment of the rural evidence base

The rural evidence base on this topic is relatively strong. The Department for Transport produces fairly comprehensive statistics about buses and the Campaign for Better Transport logs bus service changes. The Community Transport Association generates information about that sector, though some of the information would benefit from an update and to show whether the sector is growing or not.

Introduction

Public transport provides travel options for people who, by choice or because of age, income or some other reason, do not have access to a private vehicle to reach employment, services and social opportunities. It is frequently cited as a priority topic for rural policy.

The focus here is on the provision of local bus services and alternatives such as community transport schemes. It is recognised that other modes, such as rail services, benefit certain rural communities.

The State of Rural Services 2016 project presents recent evidence about the provision of services to residents and businesses in rural England. This initial output from the project is focused specifically on local buses and community transport.

There is longstanding recognition that providing accessible and good quality services to rural communities poses certain challenges. These arise from factors such as the geography of small and scattered settlements, lost economies of scale, additional travel requirements and the delivery costs involved. However, innovation and good practice may provide solutions.

Alongside this are broader trends in service provision, which are not specific to rural areas, but are just as important. They include the squeeze on public sector budgets, growing expectations of community or voluntary effort and the rapid growth of online services.

The project's main purpose is quite simply to inform, engage and stimulate debate about the needs of rural communities. To that end the main target audiences are those who make policies and those who deliver services. It is important that service needs of rural communities are properly understood and considered. Rural needs are less likely to be overlooked or misinterpreted if there is a sound and readily available evidence base.

The context for this report is a widely held view – not least among the Rural England Stakeholder Group – that there is significantly less rural research and evidence now than in the past. There is a strong desire to see that trend reversed. If nothing else, the project has enabled the rural services evidence base to be reviewed and particular gaps within it to be highlighted.

The nine service topics that will be covered by the full State of Rural Services report are: local buses and community transport; welfare services; access to cash; further education; the retail sector; mental health services; older people's services; public health services; and community assets.

The report has been researched and written for Rural England by Brian Wilson.

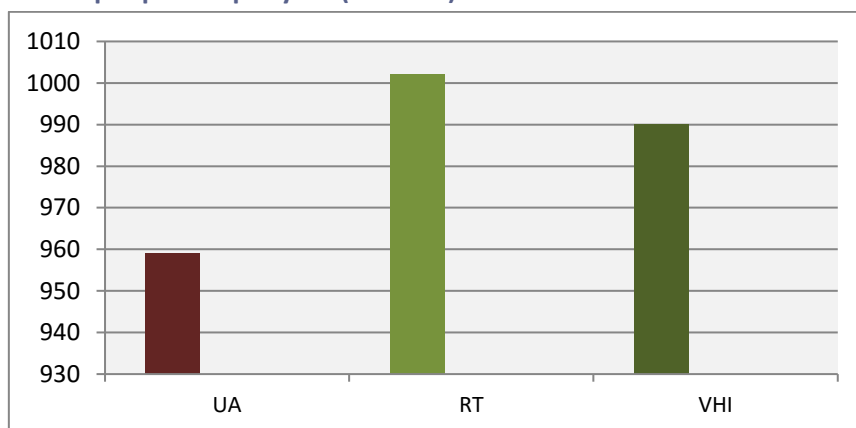
Findings

Travel patterns

The National Travel Survey managed by the Department for Transport is a key data source which sheds light on travel patterns and needs. It is used within the Defra Statistical Digest of Rural England. In the four charts re-presenting that information below UA = urban areas, RT = rural towns and fringe areas, and VHI = villages, hamlets and isolated dwellings.

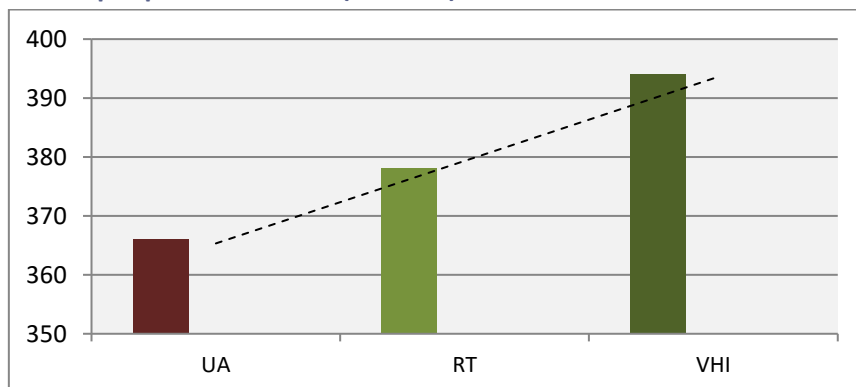
On average, rural residents make a higher number of trips (journeys) than their urban counterparts, although the difference is fairly modest and not a simple matter of rurality. Indeed, the highest number of trips (1,002 per year) is made by residents living in rural towns and fringe areas. Living in deeper rural areas may actually deter some trip making.

Chart 1.1 Trips made per person per year (2008-12)



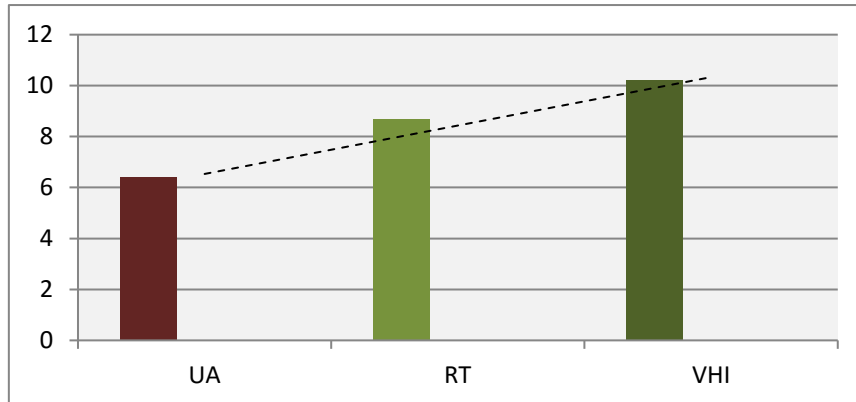
There is, however, a clear rural dimension to the time spent travelling by residents. Those living in the smaller rural settlements (VHI) spend 394 hours travelling over the space of a year, compared with 366 hours for urban residents.

Chart 1.2 Travel time per person in hours (2008-12)



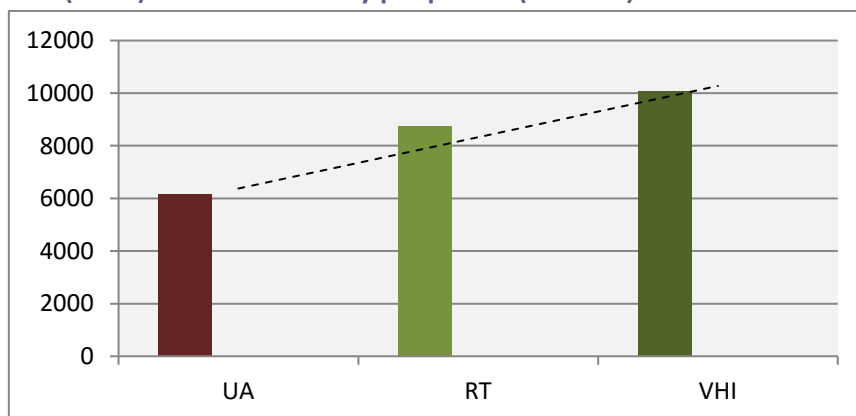
There is also a clear rural finding for the average length of trips made by residents. For those living in the smaller rural settlements the average is 10.2 miles, whilst for those in urban areas it is noticeably less at 6.4 miles.

Chart 1.3 Average trip length in miles (2008-12)



The rural-urban differential is just as evident if the measure used is total distance travelled annually by a resident. Chart 1.4 shows that those in the smaller rural settlements on average travel 10,057 miles, whilst those in rural towns and fringe areas on average travel 8,763 miles. Overall, residents in smaller rural settlements travel 63% further than residents in urban areas.

Chart 1.4 Distance (miles) travelled annually per person (2008-12)



Mode of travel

As table 1a shows, when travelling rural residents are more likely to be using a car than their urban counterparts. Some 88% of the mileage by those living in smaller rural settlements is made by private car or van, either as the driver or as a passenger.

Rural residents make a relatively small share of their mileage by local bus or on foot. In the smaller rural settlements residents make just 2% of their miles travelled by local bus services, a figure which rises slightly to 3% for rural town residents. Those living in rural areas also travel a noticeably smaller proportion of their mileage by 'other modes', a category which includes rail and underground/metro travel.

Table 1a Per cent of miles travelled by residents, by mode of transport (2008-12)

	Car or van driver	Car or van passenger	Local bus	Walking	Other modes	Total (all modes)
UA	48%	28%	5%	3%	16%	100%
RT	56%	30%	3%	2%	9%	100%
VHI	59%	29%	2%	1%	9%	100%

Footnote: the 'other modes' category includes rail, underground/metro, motorbike, taxi, air and ferry.

This pattern is reflected in high levels of car ownership in rural areas. Analysis of 2012 data shows that across all rural settlements:

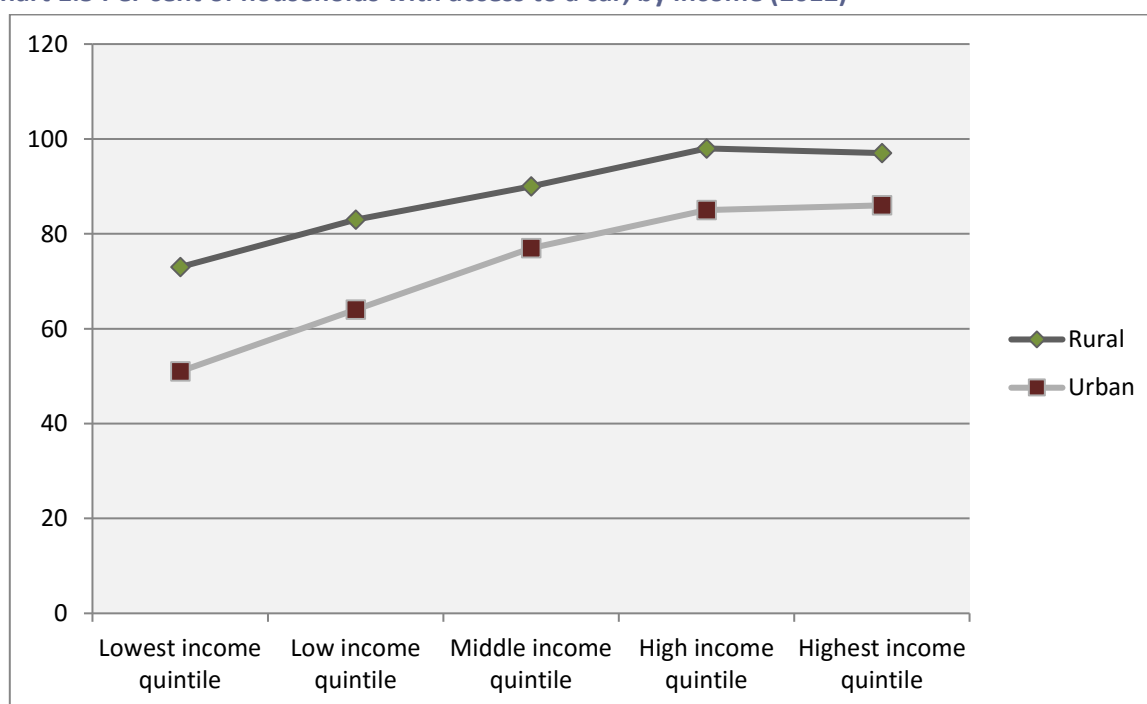
- 11% of households had no access to a car or van;
- 42% of households had access to one car or van; and
- 48% of households had access to two or more cars or vans.

This suggests that different members within rural households would, in many cases, find it difficult to go about their daily lives without their own access to a car.

Nonetheless, the statistics find that around one in nine rural households have no car and are dependent on other means of transport.

As the chart below shows, comparing rural with urban areas, the largest difference in car ownership is evident among low income households. Almost three quarters (73%) of rural households who were in the bottom fifth of incomes had access to a car. Put another way, low income rural households are 70% more likely to have access to a car than low income urban households.

Chart 1.5 Per cent of households with access to a car, by income (2012)



It seems reasonable to conclude that this is symptomatic of a lack of alternative transport options to car ownership. It also helps explain why rural households spend a relatively large share of their disposable income on transport (12.5% or £91.20 per week, at 2013 prices, compared with 10.8% or £64.60 per week for urban households, according to the ONS Living Costs and Food Survey).

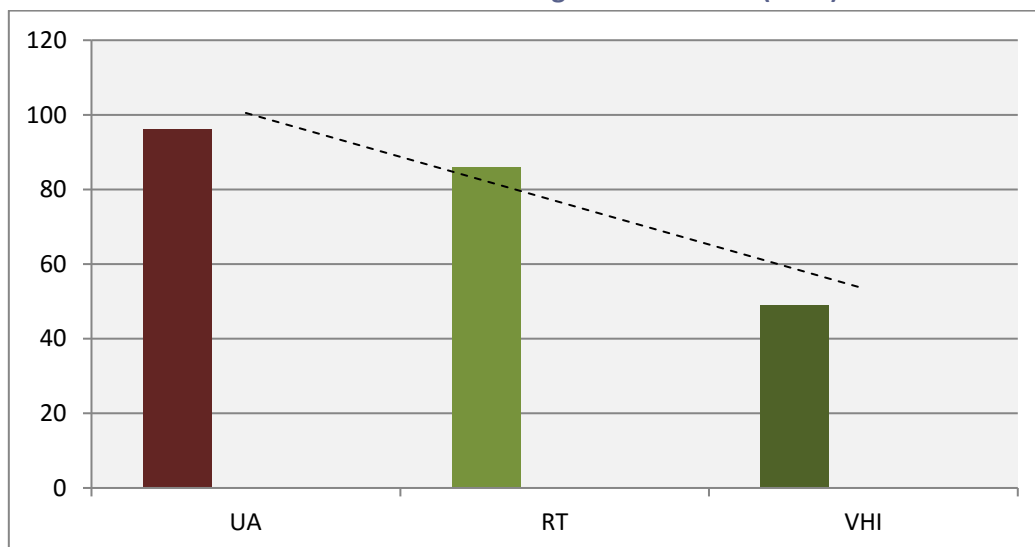
Access to bus services

The Department for Transport applies a standard definition to measure the availability of bus services to households. It records whether there is a bus stop with an hourly or better bus service that is within 13 minutes typical walking distance. This allows for comparisons between different types of area, although there may, of course, be rural locations where walking to a nearby bus stop is hazardous given the lack of a safe path or pavement. One other caution is that the most recent figures available using this measure refer to 2012, so will not take account of the most recent trends.

Analysis of the National Travel Survey by Defra shows that:

- 86% of households in rural town and fringe areas could access a regular bus service in 2012. This is an improvement on the position a decade earlier (75% in 2002), although is lower than the peak a year earlier (89% in 2011);
- 49% of households¹ in the smaller rural settlements could access a regular bus service in 2012. This is an improvement on the position a decade earlier (38% in 2002);
- The comparable figures for urban households were 96% in both 2002 and 2012.

Chart 1.6 Per cent of households with access to a regular bus service (2012)



Bus service mileage

Many rural bus services receive subsidy from the local transport authority. This support sustains routes where patronage will be low, typically serving smaller and scattered rural settlements. It also

¹ This figure appears high compared with those for immediately preceding years, which could result from sampling error. However, the overall finding of improvement over a decade seems robust.

ensures that some busier services, which are commercial during daytime hours, are run into the evening or at weekends.

The Public Service Vehicle (PSV) Survey by the Department for Transport shows that the number of miles run annually by publically supported bus services (England, outside London) reduced by 75 million over the four year period from 2011 to 2015. Over that same period the number of miles that were run annually by commercially operated bus services increased by 42 million. There was, therefore, a net reduction of 33 million miles. Both the majority of the decline in supported services and the majority of the increase in commercial services took place in non-metropolitan (or shire) areas.

It is possible to disaggregate this survey data further to individual local authority areas. This allows analysis for those areas classified as either predominantly rural (PR) or significant rural (SR). As the following table shows, measured by vehicle miles run, the decrease in local authority supported bus services was almost balanced by the increase in commercial bus services in rural areas. More specifically in PR and SR areas:

- Local authority supported bus services were running 34 million fewer miles in 2014/15 than they had been in 2011/12; whilst
- Commercial bus services were running 31 million more miles in 2014/15 than they had been in 2011/12.

To put that another way, based on miles run, supported services made up 28% of the total in rural local authority areas in 2011/12. Three years later they made up only 21% of that total.

Table 1b Million vehicle miles run by local bus services (2011-15)

		2011/12 (a)	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15 (b)	Change (a) to (b)
Significant Rural:						
SR	LA supported services	63	58	52	45	-18
	Commercial services	174	182	184	186	+12
Predominantly Rural:						
PR	LA supported services	64	59	57	48	-16
	Commercial services	147	152	154	166	+19
Combined Rural:						
SR +	LA supported services	127	117	109	93	-34
PR	Commercial services	321	334	338	352	+31

This could mean that busier inter-urban and rural bus routes have been gaining frequency at the expense of quieter rural bus routes, and/or it could mean that some previously supported bus routes are now operating commercially. The industry believes some providers have retained services by flexing what is commercial, though the law forbids actual cross-subsidy.

Funding support

Whatever the explanation, there is a growing body of evidence reporting on local authority reviews of their financial support and on cuts to rural bus services. The context for this, of course, is a period

in which Government revenue grant to help fund local authority services has reduced considerably. Whilst local authorities have a duty to identify socially necessary services, any subsidy they provide is discretionary. The Campaign for Better Transport has been recording and mapping trends over a number of years. Their most recent *Buses in Crisis* report found that across England there was:

- A net reduction of £20.5 million in local authority support for bus services over the most recent year recorded (2013/14 to 2014/15). This represents a cut of over 8% in local authority support funding;
- A net reduction of £73.9 million in local authority support for bus services over the four year period from 2010/11 to 2014/15. This represents a cut of almost 25% in local authority support funding.

Cuts to funding support have happened in both shire and metropolitan areas, and can be seen in all regions. However, the four numerically largest cuts that took place in 2014/15 were all in shire county areas. A few largely rural shire counties no longer provide any support for local buses.

During the period 2005 to 2015 local bus fares in non-metropolitan areas rose by 44%, whilst the retail prices index rose by a lower 35%. However, this would appear to reflect rising operating costs (fuel, insurance, etc) rather than an attempt to offset any loss of subsidy.

Service reductions

The table below shows how during the year 2014/15 this translated into bus service cuts or reductions. The Campaign for Better Transport says that across England² there have been around 2,000 bus services reduced, altered or withdrawn over the period since 2010/11.

Bus services in England that during the year were:	2014/15	2015/16 prov.
Reduced or otherwise altered	274	248
Withdrawn altogether	222	124
Total for the two categories above	496	372

Service cuts tend to affect different areas in different years, as funding reviews are implemented. In 2014/15 the shire areas where the most bus services were withdrawn, reduced or altered were North Yorkshire, Cumbria, Dorset, Herefordshire and Nottinghamshire. It appears that the most affected shires in 2015/16 will be Devon, Hertfordshire, Staffordshire and East Sussex.

A report by the charity, Age UK, illustrates the impacts of bus service cuts on the lives of older people living in rural areas. This can include difficulty in accessing healthcare appointments, meeting up with friends and taking part in social activities, amongst other things. There are also concerns cited about the cost of using alternatives, such as a taxi for food shopping. The report concludes that it is, therefore, ironic that free national bus travel has been such a success, with growing numbers of older people applying for the concession since its introduction in 2008.

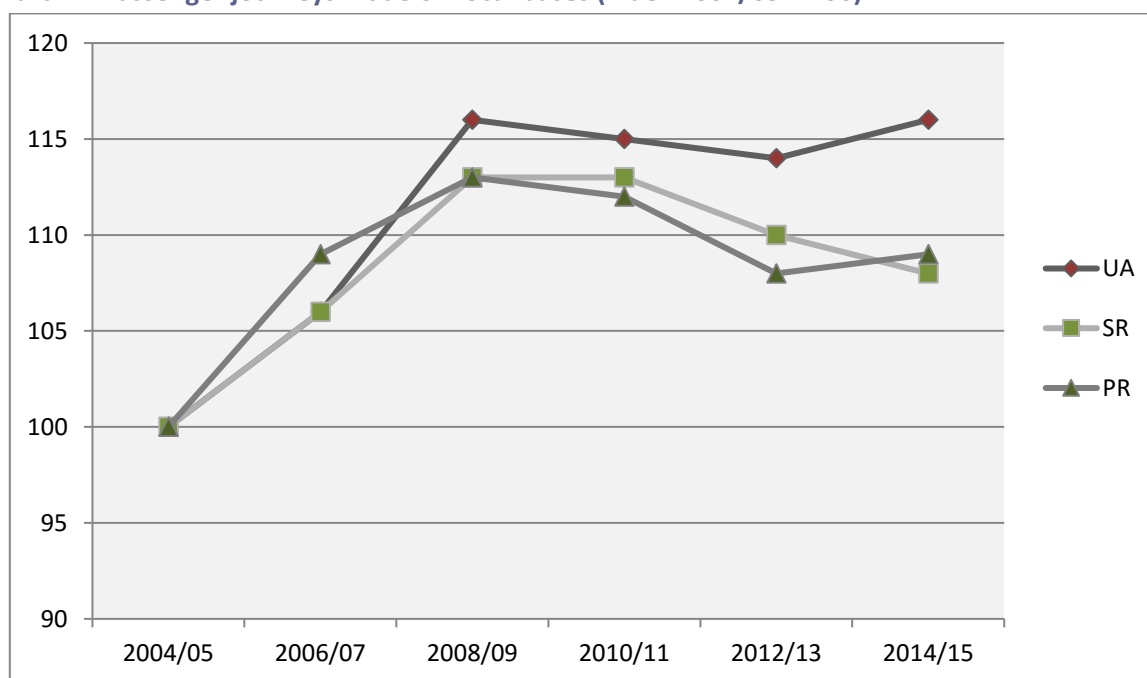
² These figures do not disaggregate shire from metropolitan areas and will not, of course, all be rural.

Passenger numbers and trends

Bus statistics from the PSV survey can also be used to look at the trend in passenger numbers who use local bus services. The chart below shows that:

- There were growing passenger numbers in both predominantly rural (PR) and significant rural (SR) local authority areas, in common with urban areas (UA), in the years prior to 2008/09. Growth from 2004/05 to 2008/09 was about 13%;
- However, since that date rural passenger numbers have fallen back somewhat, whilst those in urban areas have plateau-ed. Rural growth over the full decade 2004/05 to 2014/15 is thus close to 8%.

Chart 1.7 Passenger journeys made on local buses (index 2004/05 = 100)



It cannot be stated categorically that the reversing trend in rural passenger numbers is a direct result of bus service reductions, but it seems likely the two are related.

Concessionary travel

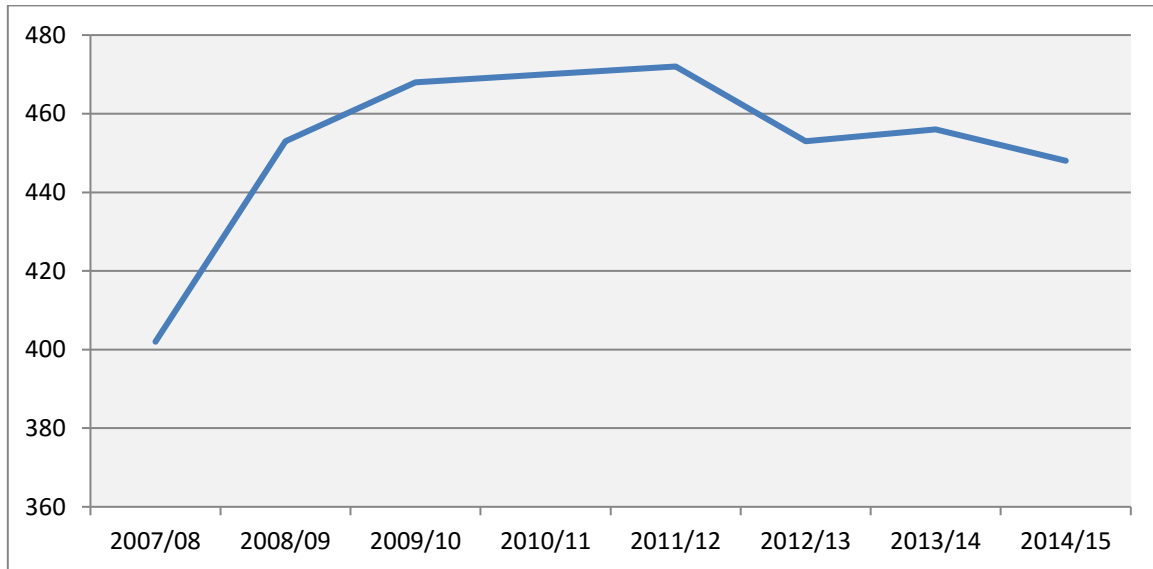
Since 2001 those on the state pension and disabled people have been entitled to free concessionary travel on local bus services at off-peak times. Many local transport authorities have funded extensions to this national statutory scheme, for example to offer concessionary travel during peak hours or to some young people.

The PSV survey shows that concessionary travel comprised 35% of all local bus journeys made during 2014/15 in non-metropolitan areas, although there are considerable variations. As the chart below shows:

- The number of concessionary journeys made rose sharply after 2008, when the statutory scheme was enhanced to include travel anywhere in England (having previously been limited to the local transport authority where a recipient lived);

- The number of concessionary journeys made then remained fairly consistent until around 2012;
- The number of concessionary journeys made then declined somewhat by 2014/15. This is thought to be in part due to bus service cuts, though it also reflects a rise in the state pension age which affects individual eligibility.

Chart 1.8 Number of concessionary journeys in non-metropolitan areas (millions)



Anecdotal evidence is that fairly high proportions of older people in rural areas fail to apply for concessionary travel because of the paucity of bus services on which to use it.

Community transport schemes

Community transport schemes often seek to plug gaps in rural transport provision or to assist certain population groups. According to a recent report by the Community Transport Association (CTA) the main users of these schemes are older people and people with disabilities, though more than half say they are used by those who are geographically excluded (which may often be a reference to rural residents).

There is some variation in the way these schemes (rural and urban) operate, with:

- 84% of them having a section 19 licence, allowing them to carry members of their scheme;
- 14% of them having a section 22 licence, allowing them to carry any member of the general public; and
- 2% of them having a full Public Service Vehicle operator licence (which those with a section 19 or 22 licence are exempted from).

According to an earlier CTA report which surveyed the sector in England as at 2011/12:

- More than 600 community transport organisations were operating in rural areas and this comprised a third of the national total;
- Some 8 million passenger journeys were made on community transport in rural areas over the space of the year;

- There were 48,000 volunteers helping to run community transport schemes in rural areas; and
- Around 2,000 people were employed by community transport organisations in rural areas.

As the information box shows, rural areas have a relatively large number of community transport organisations given their population, but typically they are small in scale.

Rural areas have around 30 community transport *organisations* per million inhabitants (urban comparator is 13).

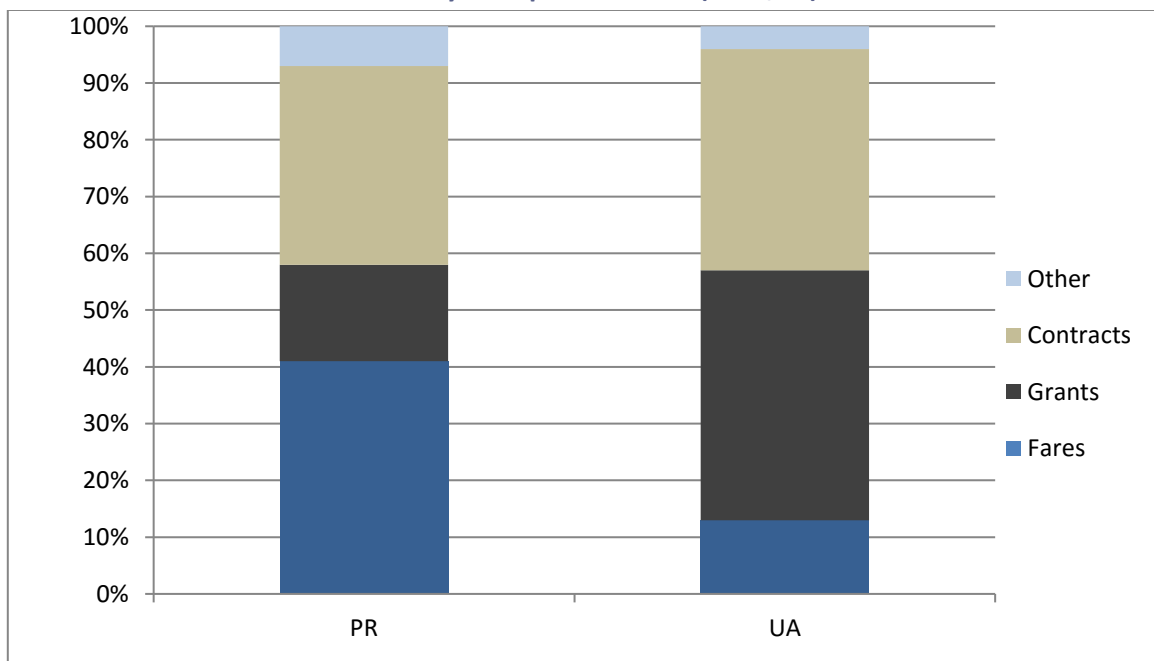
The organisations in predominantly rural areas carry around half as many *passengers* as those in predominantly urban areas.

Community transport organisations in rural areas rely more on *volunteers* and less on employees than those in urban areas.

Schemes in predominantly rural areas are far more reliant upon revenue from fares than those in urban areas. The following chart shows that rural community transport schemes get 41% of their income from fare collection. The converse is that rural schemes are much less dependent on grants than their urban counterparts.

The CTA said as recently as 2014 that, whilst there are areas of growth in the sector, local authority grant funding was under close scrutiny and many operators were facing funding cuts. As a result many community transport providers were raising concerns about the sustainability of their operations.

Chart 1.9 Sources that fund community transport schemes (2011/12)



There are, of course, various other ways that rural residents may travel, aside from owning their own car. This can include informal arrangements, such as car sharing and lift giving, as well as transport provision by the education, health and social care sectors.

In conclusion...

Although car ownership is high in rural areas, public transport is important for certain groups. This, when added to the challenge of serving dispersed settlement patterns, poses a central concern. Many rural bus services depend on subsidy to sustain them and are vulnerable if public sector budgets are reduced. There is soft evidence of local solutions being sought to keep services going, yet the fact remains that since about 2012 rural indicators have been pointing downwards – public subsidy reductions, service cutbacks and patronage declining. It may be that community transport is plugging gaps. There is a need for more current data to show whether earlier growth in community transport is in fact continuing.

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Rural England Stakeholders:



Rural England Supporters:

