

Briefing:

Transport Select Committee Bus Market Inquiry

In July 2018, the UK Parliament's Transport Select Committee launched an inquiry into how bus services are run in England outside London to try and understand the reasons behind the national decline in bus use – in London, bus use per passenger has increased by 52% over the last 25 years, whereas it has fallen by 40% in other metropolitan areas. During the inquiry, the committee wanted to consider:

- Bus service reliability
- How services are run in metro-mayor, metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas
- How they are financed
- Examples of innovation and best practice.

[The CTA responded with a written submission in September, which you can view here.](#)

In November 2018, the Committee, chaired by Lilian Greenwood MP, held its first oral evidence session as part of their inquiry. The Committee chose Bristol as its location to host the session, inviting transport officers and decision makers from local authorities in the West of England, where bus passenger journeys are increasing and bucking national trends. The Committee touched on several key themes relating to the bus market, exploring the reasons behind the success in the West of England, factors that could contribute to rising passenger numbers, and barriers to further success. The evidence session covered a number of different topics and this briefing seeks to cover the points most relevant to community transport.

Attending the session was Tim Bowles (Mayor of the West of England), Jason Humm (Head of Transport, West of England Combined Authority), Derek Fishpool (Devon County Council), Ralph Ellis (Public Transport Officer, Plymouth County Council), and Karen Rose (Community Transport Adviser, Devon County Council). We were pleased to see that the interests of community transport were represented on the panel.

Accessibility

It was heartening that the Committee focussed explicitly on the accessibility of the bus market, considering it a key requirement when judging the success of a network. It was recognised that aspects such as real time information and improved technology were important in making the bus network more accessible and in boosting people's confidence to use buses. And it was particularly positive that, while the Committee acknowledged the improvements made by local authorities and bus operators in improving the accessibility of bus passenger transport, it also recognised that accessibility is a multi-faceted issue, there are aspects that need further work, and that the legislation requiring all buses to be wheelchair-accessible by 2020 is only the first step to ensuring that the bus network is accessible for all people.

Mayor Tim Bowles reinforced this point, vitally pointing out that accessibility is as much about enabling people to actually reach existing mainstream routes as it is about making vehicles more physically accessible. Indeed, this is something that community transport operators have always recognised and striven to achieve in their work. As well as providing wheelchair accessible vehicles and passenger assistance, many section 22 services are run on routes with lower patronage that feed into main commercial routes, while many section 19 services provide transport to main routes and stations directly from a user's home, in a 'hub and spoke' system. By providing the first and last leg of journeys to otherwise inaccessible stops on commercial bus routes and stations, community transport supports the mainstream network to make the overall journey possible. Tim recommended that a network review be conducted to ensure that this element of accessibility is delivered, and the CTA hope that community transport's contribution to the mainstream network will be recognised and its value integrated into any subsequent network change.

Furthermore, we were pleased to hear that in Plymouth community transport is considered not just an alternative to the mainstream network but something that can be more integrated with it. Public Transport Officer Ralph Ellis shared with the Committee the way in which Plymouth Citybus have put a sum of money into a dial-a-ride service in recognition of the fact that community transport is able to serve a unique need in more isolated communities in a way that a conventional service would be unable to.

Funding

On top of accessibility, the importance of funding was discussed, with Tim attributing investment, alongside planning, as being one of the key reasons for the success in the West of England's bus market. He explained how it has enabled the purchase of 120 new buses, the development of RTI, as well as the improvement of infrastructure in terms of customers' waiting environments and road space. In conjunction with this, the impact of reduced funding from central Government was highlighted, with Daniel Zeichner MP from the Committee speaking about how 'the funding decline has gone off a cliff nationally. We have whole swathes of the country where there is no support going in at all.' Derek supported this, describing the reduction of services in Devon in recent years as a result

of funding cutbacks, which he states has particularly affected rural areas. Similarly, Ralph described how Saturday services, early morning and late evening services have been cut in Plymouth.

Service reductions and cuts like those described leaves communities, especially in rural locations, isolated and either without access to transport or with services that are too infrequent to adequately serve their needs. And often it is community transport which steps in to provide the journeys that the conventional network is unable to cater for, despite increasingly restricted grant payments and funding for community transport operators, too. Karen Rose, Community Transport Adviser, admitted that the provision of transport to more isolated communities was challenging, that for rural communities, 'quite often it is ensuring that each village has a weekly service to get to essential shopping, backed up with other options such as voluntary car schemes to help people get to medical appointments at other times.'

Recommendations

From these discussions, the Committee explored some key recommendations. The speakers examined the benefits of developing a central government bus strategy, which they hoped would provide long-term stability and a clear steer in terms of investment and planning, as well as providing a central source of good practice. The speakers also emphasised the importance of collectively harnessing different areas of funding and resources to enable benefits to be delivered, given that buses fit into areas beyond transport, such as communities and local government, as well as health. As the Chair exemplified, 'Of course, if you can tackle social isolation and loneliness, providing transport might be in one budget but the savings for that might be in a different budget – one that is not devolved to the local area'.

The CTA believe this point to be a vital one – our members have described the way in which health services, for example, have often sidelined their attempts to get funding, wrongly assuming health and transport provision to be separate areas, despite that community transport is often vital in delivering non-emergency patient transport. CTA has also observed how projects in the wider charity sector that funded by grant-makers don't give sufficient attention to planning how people will access those services and transport planning can be an afterthought once budgets and resources have been allocated. This doesn't mean that every project needs its own minibus, as most of the needs new projects want to serve could be met in partnership with CTA members, which is already common practice for many charities.

As such, the CTA hope that a central government bus strategy is able to provide a framework through which strategy and funding can be collectivised and centralised, in the process incorporating the community transport sector.

More information:

If you want to talk more about this topic with CTA you can contact CTA's Policy Executive Suzanne Lau on suzanne@ctauk.org or 0161 351 1475