

## Press release

The government has issued a call for evidence about the future of rural transport. What is becoming clear is that when government Covid 19 bail outs for the transport industry come to an end, which undoubtedly they will, there will be a drastic rethink of the way transport is provided in rural areas.

With this in mind the Herefordshire Sustainable Transport Group (HSTG) has submitted its findings as part of the call for evidence. A summary of the findings is given here.

- Incentivising positive changes in rural economics and society leading to a growth in localism is the most important aspect determining the future provision of rural transport. Encouraging and stimulating the consolidation and development of rural communities within the Herefordshire framework of villages and market towns is essential in reducing the demand for travel and hence reducing the cost and difficulty of provision.
- Development of a low-cost utility electric car and the possibilities for creating Community Interest Company rural car pools should be examined. These could have their own recharging depot possibly linked to a locally generated electricity supply.
- Widespread encouragement of active travel in rural areas should go hand in hand with a blanket speed restriction of 20/30 mph for unclassified and 50 mph for A and B class roads, together with effective enforcement.
- It is likely that the future role of the conventional bus will be limited to the inter-urban routes. That leaves a huge gap in a network that should serve the market towns and villages.
- An increase in rural Community Transport (CT) organisations could help fill this gap. However, it requires a lead organisation to offer advice, assistance and coordination with groups of parish councils in setting up a particular service or network of services in rural areas. Such a network must be seen as complementary to the existing inter-urban bus network in a particular area thus reinforcing effective integration of journeys as identified in the call for evidence guidance.
- Existing Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) currently provide examples of public, private and community partnerships which it may be possible to build on. Monitoring of these schemes should provide evidence of their success, value and means of providing rural transport within an integrated rural network. It is possible that DRT and CT will join in a future model for rural public transport, integrated with conventional public transport inter-urban services.
- Public transport publicity is important. This includes the case for county wide timetable books that are of valuable use in planning journeys in rural areas which may have irregular internet coverage.
- Ancillary services such as parcels by bus should be examined as a supplement income.

- The scope for increasing the use of rural railways should be studied, especially in respect of co-ordination with bus services and the creation of station hubs. The reopening of stations should also be closely followed, especially where rural communities have experienced growth.
- **For rural shire counties such as Herefordshire there is an urgent need for the Transport Authority to develop a rural transport strategy and define an integrated and costed network with which it can seek to secure central government funding.**

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# Herefordshire Sustainable Transport Group (HSTG)

This paper is the response of HSTG to the government's consultation call for evidence on Future of Transport: rural strategy.



## Summary of Findings

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- ◆ **For rural shire counties such as Herefordshire there is an urgent need for the Transport Authority to develop a rural transport strategy and define an integrated and costed network with which it can seek to secure central government funding.**

# Herefordshire Sustainable Transport Group (HSTG)

This paper is the response of HSTG to the government's consultation call for evidence on Future of Transport: rural strategy (updated 2 December 2020). Its content relates to Herefordshire, one of the most rural of English shire counties.

## 1 Background

### 1.1 Population

In 2018 the Herefordshire Unitary Authority published its Strategic Intelligence Report on the Population of Herefordshire. Its findings indicated that: *Almost one-fifth of the population live in the three largest market towns – including Ross (currently 11,200 people) which also increased by 11 per cent, Leominster (12,000) and Ledbury (10,000) both increased by eight per cent. Just over half of all residents (99,900) live in areas classified as rural, with around two in five (79,800) living in the most rural 'village and dispersed'. In general, the population of rural areas has grown less than urban areas.*

It further reported that *. According to measures based on the 2001 Census used in the calculation of the Local Government Finance Settlement, no other English county-level authority has a greater proportion of its population living in output areas with a density of 50 people per square kilometre or below (described as 'very sparse' areas) than Herefordshire (25 per cent). This presents particular challenges for service delivery in the county. To put this into context, consider the three English counties with a lower population density than Herefordshire: Northumberland, Cumbria and North Yorkshire. Only 13 per cent of Northumberland's population lived in 'very sparse' OAs in 2001; 19 per cent of North Yorkshire's and 17 per cent of Cumbria's. These figures illustrate that relatively large areas of these counties are uninhabited; overall population density is low but the population is less scattered across the whole area. Of the neighbouring authorities, only Shropshire is in a similar situation to Herefordshire, with 21 per cent of its population living in 'very sparse' OAs.*

The report also tells us that over the years there has been a change in the age profile of people living in rural villages and dispersed areas. In the second decade of the millennium, of persons living in these areas 27% were over 65 whilst only 12% were aged between 16 and 29. This is indicative of the changing economic and social structure of rural areas over the latter half of the twentieth century into the twenty first. This has manifested itself with increased centralisation: employment being located in urban areas together with centralisation of services leading to wholesale closures of doctors surgeries, post offices and local stores and more recently the closure of local public houses. All this has led to an increased need to travel, often considerable distances.

Perhaps the most telling statement to come out of the report has been emboldened in the above. The distribution and changing age structure of population presents particular challenges for service delivery. As a result of this it also presents particular challenges in the provision of rural transport. At no time has this been more apparent than in the present and probably well into the future.

### 1.2 Current Transport Provision

Changes in the economic and social structure of rural areas in Herefordshire has led to the dominance of the private car as the principal form of transport. Parallel with this has been a substantial reduction in the provision of rural bus services. The 1986 bus deregulation act separated bus services into those that would be provided commercially by the operator and those that would be supported by the local authority as being socially necessary. In one sweep this removed an important element of cross subsidy of services which often existed within a bus company. In other words, profitable urban and inter-urban services often supported non-profit rural services in order to maintain a network. The result of the act put the onus of support for non-profitable services onto the local authority. This was the beginning of the fragmentation of rural bus networks and once this fragmentation took hold, service frequencies declined and people lost faith in the local bus.

The House of Commons Transport Committee report on Bus Services Outside London of 2019 gave a precise yet succinct comment in its introduction:

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*The deregulation of bus services outside London in the 1980s was meant to address the steady decline in bus use since the 1950s and bring in a new era of bus travel. In the 1984 Buses White Paper the then Government asserted that:*

*Without the dead hand of restrictive regulation fares could be reduced now on many bus routes and the operator would still make a profit. New and better services would be provided. More people would travel.*

*Bus operators will look keenly to see where and when people want to travel. If one operator fails to provide a service that is wanted, another will.*

*Successive governments have stuck with deregulation, but the promised benefits have never materialised. Deregulation has, at best, done little more than slow the decline in bus use.*

The whole scenario has since been accelerated by the pressures exerted on local authority budgets during periods of austerity. Then enters the new dimension of a pandemic and the dramatic effect on the way we operate and in all probability will have to operate into the future.

Interestingly, rail services still play an important part in rural counties such as Herefordshire and their future role must not be overlooked.

## **2. The Future of Rural Transport in Herefordshire**

In early 2020 it was encouraging to hear the government commit itself to the first ever long term bus strategy and funding settlement. It is equally encouraging to read in the foreword to this Call for Evidence that rural areas are not being left out.

*Technology will drive radical changes in transport in the next 10 years, with profound implications for transport users and businesses. I am determined for the benefits of transport innovation to be enjoyed by everyone, wherever they live, **including those living and working in rural areas.** (Rachel McClean, Under Secretary of State for Transport)*

What can be done in Herefordshire to provide rural transport of the future? Our submission follows the Call for Evidence in considering:

Changes in transport technology

Changes in transport demand

Changes in transport business models

### **2.1. Changes in Transport Technology**

By far the biggest change is the commitment to zero vehicle emissions inherent in the switch from petrol and diesel to electricity as the means of propulsion. But, for people in rural areas there are some penalties in this. Firstly the cost of the vehicle, secondly the supply of the electricity thirdly the distance range of the vehicle before battery recharging. However, the opportunity does arise for both central and local government to take the initiative with the development of a low cost utility electric car and the possibilities for creating rural car pools. These could be set up as a Community Interest Company and run as a not for profit company managed by the community, the private sector or a partnership of both. The company would have its own depot for recharging, possibly linked to a locally generated electricity supply, and would deliver to/collect vehicles from customers. The model for such rural transport schemes may become increasingly practicable as petrol/diesel cars are phased out. Community cars which can be booked for use are already evident in a number of rural areas:

(reference example Community Car Club Network: *Co-wheels now delivers car clubs in over 60 locations across the UK. We have a diverse range of operations, from city centres to villages. Some of our car clubs are used by local authorities and universities as pool cars for staff, whilst others focus entirely on being shared cars for local residents. We encourage local ownership of our operations which are sometimes run as community car clubs or as one of our social franchises.*)

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A second innovation is the development of electric bikes and scooters which permit a far wider range of travel than the conventional pedal cycle. Development of rural community e-bike schemes are already taking place (see Department for Transport Shared Electric Bike Programme Report 2016). However, in discussion with cyclists the greatest disincentive to the use of e-bikes, e-scooters and mobility scooters in the rural areas of Herefordshire is the safety factor, especially with regard to the speed of traffic on unclassified roads. There is also an incidence of the use of large agricultural vehicles related to Herefordshire's intensive farming. These take up the whole width of the road and can be an intimidating feature to both cyclists and pedestrians. The widespread encouragement of active travel in rural areas needs to go hand-in-hand with a blanket speed restriction of 20/30 mph for unclassified roads and 50 mph for A and B class roads, together with effective enforcement.

## **2.2. Changes in Transport Demand**

The need to travel is directly related to the provision of services and employment. The pandemic is showing us that in certain occupations, a switch to working from home is feasible and possible. Equally so, the reversal of the trend to centralisation is also possible with a move towards localism. Observations in the small market town of Ledbury, Herefordshire, and discussions with retailers indicate that more people are now shopping in Ledbury rather than travelling to the big supermarkets in Hereford, Worcester, Gloucester or Cheltenham. There is clearly a case for promoting the smaller towns and large villages as focal centres for the rural areas. This was traditionally the case and a rural economic and land use policy that will foster a return to that state would be extremely welcome.

The re-establishment of local stores and post offices in key villages should be a key part of rural development policy. There are examples elsewhere in the country of these services now being combined with the need to save the local public houses, threatened by the over centralisation of ownership in large pub companies. The matching of housing development with stimulating and establishing local employment is also a key to reducing transport demand and where large scale housing is taking place, as in periphery villages to Hereford, it is essential that local public transport services are tied into it.

All too often over the past decades there has been a failure to recognise the relationship between land use and transport demand in the rush to follow a free market economic policy.

Localism comes in a number of innovative ways. Deliveries from market towns or local village community shops could be made by pedi-cargo e-bikes. In this respect the Cargodale scheme in Yorkshire based on Todmorden market is a good example.

Reference example Cargodale: *Our main suppliers are the Todmorden Indoor Market – which has hurriedly gone online so that people can order and pay for vegetables, meat and cheese online – and the Tod Almighty wholefood shop which takes phone orders. On market days we get a list of addresses for deliveries around 12.30. The wholefood shop texts a list around 4pm. We've had help with creating optimal routes from Q Routes, and with managing the round from Drivernet. Our rider sets out about 1.30, and on busy days completes about 15 orders for the market and a 3 or 4 for the wholefood shop over the next 3-4 hours.*

Incentivising positive changes in rural economics and society leading to a growth in localism is the most important aspect determining the future provision of rural transport. Encouraging and stimulating the consolidation and development of rural communities within the Herefordshire framework of villages and market towns is essential in reducing the need to travel and hence reducing the cost of provision.

## **2.3. Changes in the Transport Business Model**

### **2.3.1 The Conventional Bus**

We have noted previously that the bus transport business model based on the 1986 deregulation act has failed. The 2017 Buses Bill attempted half heartedly to dilute the excess of deregulation by providing increased powers for local authorities to enter into partnerships or franchise arrangements for the provision of bus services. The Bill did not go far enough. In rural areas the decline in bus services has reached an all time low with many rural areas without any buses at all. Herefordshire is comparatively lucky in that its geography has allowed for mostly inter-urban routes to survive commercially and provide essential links between the market towns and Hereford. However, the local network of market day services from the rural hinterland into the market towns has been severely curtailed.



It is likely that the future role of the conventional bus will be limited to the inter-urban routes in the future. But that leaves a huge gap in a network that should serve the market towns and villages. What innovation in public transport supply can fill this gap?

In section 2.2. we noted that a move to localism can strengthen the rural community and the provision of a public transport service must be seen as an integral part of such localism and the community.

### **2.3.2 Community Transport (CT)**

Community transport schemes can be viewed as a part of this move to localism. At present there are six community transport schemes operating in rural Herefordshire. However, they are provided mostly for people who are unable to use conventional public transport aimed at older/disabled people. The schemes operate under what are called Section 19 or Section 22 permits.

Section 22 permits are the more interesting in that they are issued by the Traffic Commissioners and allow the community operator to run as a local bus service and carry fare paying passengers. They also allow for the community operator to tender for local authority bus contracts and to claim reimbursement for the acceptance of concessionary bus passes. At the present it appears community transport organisations are reluctant to go down the path of Section 22 permits because of the paperwork, vehicle maintenance requirements and if operating a local bus service the need to adhere to the registered timetable. The last point can prove particularly onerous where the organisation operates on a volunteer basis.

To increase the scope for the use of community bus organisations with Section 22 permits requires a lead organisation to offer advice, assistance and coordination with groups of parish councils in setting up a particular service or network of services in rural areas. Such a network must be seen as complementary to the existing bus network in a particular area thus reinforcing the need for effective integration of services providing increased journey opportunities.

Also, to be successful, rural community transport schemes require a long term commitment to being financed. To think that community schemes can take over from conventional bus services and thus reduce or eliminate a subsidy requirement is fallacious.

The provision of a lead organisation would naturally fall to the local transport authority whose responsibility is to provide socially necessary transport services that cannot be provided commercially. To date rural local authorities have shown little interest in creating small community transport teams. This we assume is the fact that support for public transport services has a low key priority in the total range of services that local authorities are responsible for.

An alternative to the above is where a group of parishes are encouraged to come together to arrange a community transport service or network and in this context, voluntary stakeholder groups such as Bus Users UK with their motto 'bringing people together' and user groups such as Rail & Bus for Herefordshire have a valuable part to play. Such groups would need to work in conjunction with the local transport authority.

The scope for advancing these ideas should be followed. (Reference example: *West Oxfordshire Community Transport Limited (WOCT) is a charitable Community Benefit Society registered under the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act 2014 by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) registration No. 7458.A Community Benefit Society is an organisation that conducts business for the benefit of the community. Any surpluses are not distributed among members or external shareholders, but returned to the organisation for further investment in its objectives.*)

### **2.3.3 Demand Responsive Transport (DRT)**

There is a great deal of talk about demand responsive transport of late. The government's 2020 report 'A Better Deal for Bus Users' included a section on funding trials of On Demand Transport Services. Such innovative services throughout the UK have come and gone with the decades and the oscillations in local authority financial support. In 2014 the journal Transport Policy published 'A Survey of Demand Responsive Transport in Britain. As expected the main finding related sustainability of a scheme to committed financial support. Very few schemes were self-supporting, the majority requiring a subsidy per passenger of between £2.00 and £10.00. The current subsidy per passenger for conventional rural bus services in Herefordshire is approximately £2.10. No more than half of all schemes reported were expected to be financially sustainable in the future. In other words the success of a scheme is



directly related to committed financial support, an element not guaranteed at this point in time. The report did, however highlight some lessons learnt which are worth reiterating.

- *DRT provision is increasingly identified as a 'deep rural product' rather than an urban solution. although successful urban examples exist*
- *Integration, rather than duplication of existing public transport provision is highlighted as an important element of design in context*
- *Dial-a-ride and community transport provision has influenced current DRT design and these stakeholders are expected to have a growing role*
- *Investment in planning and consulting at the design phase is essential*
- *There is a growing role for technology to assist with coordination and booking*
- *An increased focus on how taxis can deliver cost-effective DRT provision needs examining*
- *Level of flexibility provided needs to be area and investment specific*
- *Good communication between stakeholders supported by training as required ensures a positive user experience*
- *Marketing is required to increase awareness about booking and use of DRT*
- *Recognising the full cost of provision, in particular the expense of certain elements, such as call centres, is important.*

Note the comment that community transport has influenced current DRT design and these stakeholders are expected to have a growing role. It is possible that community transport and demand responsive transport will merge in the future with the potential for both the community and private enterprise to be involved. But this brings us back to the importance of the community and the need to bring together ground level parish councils, community groups and local businesses in order to plan and implement a scheme. The main question remains, who is going to arrange and oversee this until a scheme is up and running and stable. Also who is going to commit long term finance to the scheme.

How far the private sector will contribute to the above remains to be seen. David Brown, Chief Executive of Go-Ahead was somewhat sceptical in a recent interview. (Reference quote: *He said the bus industry had to recognise there was a huge change in travel demand. However, he said experiments in demand-responsive travel pioneered by Go-Ahead had not been a success, with the PickMeUp service in Oxford axed this year – a decision taken pre-Covid.*

*Brown said the prospects for such bus services – touted by some as the future of public transport outside cities – were not encouraging: "In the end you need a substantial amount of support. You will not make rural demand-responsive travel work on a commercial basis."*

Elsewhere, companies such as ViaVan offer a tailor made package for introducing a DRT scheme. (Reference examples: *schemes in partnership with the Welsh Government ( Fflecsi), NHS Trusts in the Mansfield, Hull and Grimsby areas (Stagecoach Direct), Tees Valley Combined Authority (TeesFlex).*) Both the Welsh and the Tees Valley schemes cover rural areas and undoubtedly should be monitored with interest.

#### **2.3.4 Public Transport Publicity**

Public transport services will only be used if people know about it. Digital electronic technology is great in cities and towns but who is going to put a display at every rural bus stop in the countryside. The need for printed timetable information remains strong for rural areas where internet coverage may be irregular. The government recognises a need for some form of centralised register of services and fares. It states: *Bus operators across England are legally required to publish and store information in the BODS standard format, providing a central source of timetable, bus location, and fare data that has the potential to give passengers accurate and up to date bus information.* Herefordshire Council continues to provide timetable cases at bus stops but the cancellation of the county wide bus timetable book created a huge dent in encouraging people to use bus services throughout the county and not just their local route. The case for the return of a county wide timetable book remains strong.

### 2.3.5 Ancillary Services and Income

An interesting aspect of past rural bus services was that they were once also parcel carriers. In the modern scheme of a return to localism there is no reason why the conventional bus, community transport and demand responsive models should not also perform local deliveries, especially in respect of same day end to end parcel transport. Such business also provides an ancillary income supporting rural transport services.

### 2.3.6 The Rural Railway

The role of railways in rural transport should not be overlooked. In Herefordshire both the Marches and the Worcester lines are well used for local travel, especially by students. The scope for increasing this should be examined especially in respect of co-ordination with local bus services and the establishment of transport hubs at railway stations. Other rural lines, such as the Heart of Wales provide a lifeline for small communities in deep rural areas. The government's Restoring Your Railway Fund is also of importance, especially in respect of reopening stations where rural communities have grown. Examples in Herefordshire are the possibilities for stations at Pontrilas on the Marches line and Withington on the Worcester Line.

### 2.3.7 Conclusion

**For rural shire counties such as Herefordshire there is an urgent need for the Transport Authority to develop a rural transport strategy and define an integrated and costed network with which it can seek to secure central government funding.**

HSTG January 2021

## Sustainable Transport Herefordshire

### Who Are We?

We are a small group of professionals who embrace transport and land use planning, economics, the environment and who see into the future and learn from the past.

The realisation that future transport has to change led to the formation of the **Herefordshire Sustainable Transport Group** in 2017 (HSTG).

We publish under the title of **Sustainable Transport Herefordshire**.

Our principal aim is to examine and study innovative, environmental and economic changes in transport that can be applied to Herefordshire's current transport problems. We seek to work with the local transport authority, local MPs, the Department for Transport, transport operators and community groups in planning the future.

HSTG is an Independent Group allied to Rail & Bus for Herefordshire and the Herefordshire Transport Alliance.

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