LGA response to Future of Transport: rural strategy – call for evidence

15th February 2021

Submission

About the LGA

The Local Government Association (LGA) is the national voice of local government. We are a politically led, cross-party membership organisation, representing councils from England and Wales. Our role is to support, promote and improve local government, and raise national awareness of the work of councils. Our ultimate ambition is to support councils to deliver local solutions to national problems.

1. Question

Do you have any evidence for the issues mentioned?

- *Dependence on the private car*
- *Access to key services*
- *Access to employment*
- *Social isolation*

Communities rely on high quality transport provision and infrastructure to get on in life. In rural areas, transport is key to helping maintain access to vital amenities and services, but local policy makers face a significant challenge of working within increasingly limited budgets to ensure our transport systems serves even those in the most remote areas.

It is often older people, and disabled and vulnerable adults, that are disproportionately more likely to experience transport isolation.[i] Indeed, Age UK found that cuts to bus services had made it more difficult for older people in particular to get to their local doctor's surgery and hospital[ii], an issue compounded by the fact that residents in rural areas are already less likely to live in close proximity to health settings, and more likely to experience 'distance decay' where service use decreases with increasing distance.[iii] For benefits claimants living in rural areas, their barriers to employment are compounded by whether or not there is suitable public transport at the necessary times, as well as the cost of travel.

The delivery of education and training in rural areas also needs to overcome the barrier of provision within more sparsely populated areas. In its State of the Nation report, The Social Mobility Commission highlighted many isolated rural and coastal towns across England as 'social mobility coldspots' where young people increasingly face a lack of access to further education and employment opportunities.[iv]

The limited availability of public transport in these areas, as well as the difficulty providers can face achieving the economies of scale to meaningfully engage isolated areas[v], presents a strong case for a rethink in how we deliver skills provision and employment support in our more rural communities.

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2. Question

Do you think there are other issues facing rural areas that we should consider in the strategy?

The current Covid-19 emergency has served to highlight the importance of fast and reliable digital connectivity to rural areas, enabling residents and businesses to work from home, and rely less on patchy rural transport. Ofcom reported that the UK's broadband networks have held up well over the course of the pandemic with only small degradation to speeds. However, in rural areas in which only slower speeds are available any degradation in speed will have had a much larger effect on user experience than in areas where faster speeds are available.

Improved digital connectivity, subsidised by public funding in areas that are unviable to commercial roll out will be a pillar of recovery and any future rural mobility ambitions. In this light, it is unfortunate that the Government has now downgraded its target to roll out gigabit broadband from 100 percent of areas by 2025 to 85 per cent (with only 5 percentage points to be delivered in uncommercial areas). We have called for the Government to publicise a revised timeline for meeting its former 100 per cent target. The scale of the connectivity challenge is evidenced in a recent piece of independent analysis by Point Topic which forecasted a five-year delay (2030) before the UK gets close to 100 per cent coverage (98 per cent).

With website traffic from mobile devices having overtaken desktops in 2017, and mobile data consumption having increased sevenfold since then, it is clear that good mobile coverage is a necessity of modern-day life. Whilst the Shared Rural Network is an important step towards universal 4g coverage, the LGA has previously outlined councils' concerns that mobile network operators' (MNOs) coverage data is not reflective of consumers' mobile experience on the ground in rural areas. Unconvinced by the accuracy of this data, councils are increasingly conducting their own independent coverage analyses to better understand the local connectivity picture. These local studies are revealing patchy access, high level of dropped call rates and not-spots in areas where coverage is reported by MNOs as sufficient. This raises significant concerns about the Government' and Ofcom's understanding of the mobile coverage currently available in rural areas. For autonomous cars, relying heavily on low latency and fast speeds, rural areas will be no-go-zones for decades unless things drastically improve.

We also need to ensure that rural communities are able to contribute to our net zero goals. Transport solutions that will reduce carbon are more difficult to implement in a rural community however in order to reach net zero every part of the transport system needs to be decarbonised. The government must be mindful of this challenge in providing rural mobility.

3. Question

Do you think there are other trends in innovation we haven't included?

The pandemic and recovery are likely to have an effect on rural mobility in particular the significant growth in home working changes people's relationship with where they live and where they work. Many families may find the appeal of more rural locations with greater space and access to the countryside after a period where they have been locked down for extended periods of time. Also, many of the drawbacks associated with moving further away from employment are largely mitigated with good broadband access allowing people to work remotely more successfully.

Structural changes to our economy over the past forty years have seen increasing urbanisation and net internal migration to our large cities. It is too early to say whether the pandemic will mean these structural factors are reversed, have stalled or merely suspended for a few years before returning. It may be too early to say but whatever the answer it will have a profound effect on rural mobility. Not least because the trends towards homeworking will dampen down demand for mobility everywhere, which will have a potentially harmful effect on many rural communities where transport markets are much closer to becoming unviable.

4. Question

What strategic approach / principles should we recommend for rural mobility?

Do you think the Future of Transport: rural strategy should include the principles for urban areas below? Which additional principles would you like to see in the strategy?

We have responded to each principle below. Some are important in both a rural and urban context, some need to be modified to remain relevant to a rural context. We have also added a specific additional principle that is particularly pertinent to rural mobility.

- new modes of transport and new mobility services must be safe and secure by design

This principle seems to be universally applicable.

- the benefits of innovation in mobility must be available to all parts of the UK and all segments of society

This principle applies especially to rural services. Rural areas are much more likely to suffer from transport poverty and poor connectivity and so we must ensure that innovation and new services do not simply sustain or accelerate the patterns of connectivity we have seen in the past.

- walking, cycling and active travel must remain the best options for short urban journeys

Active journeys should be the preferred mode of travel in all contexts. There are greater obstacles to active travel in a rural setting but policy should be aiming to maximise the number of journeys that can be taken by active travel in all contexts.

- mass transit must remain fundamental to an efficient transport system

Whilst this is true where possible mass transit solutions are much more likely to be uneconomic in areas we would consider to be rural and many councils already find it difficult or unable to subsidise services.

- new mobility services must lead the transition to zero emissions

We strongly support this principle but as we have highlighted above that we must examine the fact that many of the solutions for decarbonisation of transport are more challenging in a rural context. It is vital that all parts of the country decarbonise in order to reach our net zero goals and therefore it is important the government

examines the spatial dimension to its decarbonisation strategy and gives consideration to different kinds of support for decarbonisation in a rural context.

- mobility innovation must help to reduce congestion through more efficient use of limited road space – for example, through sharing rides, increasing occupancy or consolidating freight

Whilst we should seek solutions that make most efficient use of the road space and therefore reducing externalities, like carbon and air pollution, constraints on road space are less of an issue in a rural context. The viability of transport services are more of a policy problem and deserve prioritisation.

- the marketplace for mobility must be open to stimulate innovation and give the best deal to consumers

As we have noted the markets for mobility and connectivity are different in rural areas. The lack of population density will always make commercial viability much harder and drive prices upwards relative to urban contexts. Open markets can help stimulate innovation and so whilst the principle applies to a rural context we must also acknowledge that transport services may be playing a different role as a social good in a rural context.

- new mobility services must be designed to operate as part of an integrated transport system combining public, private and multiple modes for transport users

It is important that transport systems seamlessly integrate for the ease of the passenger. This is especially important for rural settings that rely on a visitor economy. Having integration of different modes can make the visiting experience easier and attract more visitors who may be unfamiliar with an area and the transport services on offer.

- data from new mobility services must be shared, where appropriate, to improve choice and the operation of the transport system

Data is important for rural communities. It is particularly important for rural public transport where service patterns are less regular so accurate information on services are much more important for passengers.

Additional principles

An additional principle would be the consideration of community access to transport services and whether transport should be considered as a social good rather than simply through the lens of a commercial enterprise.

The role of parish and town councils may need to be considered – for example running a community transport series of trips to supermarkets, town centres etc.

5. Question

Are there specific considerations for testing and trialing new technologies in rural areas that you think we should consider?

There may be specific challenges in rural areas in attracting take up of testing and trialing of new initiatives. These include:

- where there is an older population whether that could lead to hesitancy in taking up and trialing new modes
- transport operators in rural areas may also be behind in digital solutions – for example they often tend to be smaller operators (who have very basic ticket machines)
- there is likely to be a higher proportion of roads that are not built to modern construction standards or dimensions which may limit scope for trials due to, e.g. reduced visibility and widths
- patchy mobile/ data signal strengths
- the speed difference between active modes and car/ van traffic

6. Question

In your view, what should the role of:

- **central government**
- **sub-national transport bodies**
- **local authorities**

be in encouraging innovation in rural areas?

Central government

Central government would play an important role in facilitating innovation in rural areas. For example, through routing grants for innovation through local authorities and ensuring that any access to grants is made as simple and quick as possible and proportionate. Government should also ensure the right regulatory framework to support innovation and ensure that any messaging is consistent and clear, particularly to help obtain local support for any trials.

Sub-national transport bodies

Sub-national transport bodies can also play an important role, for example through facilitating the sharing of good practice and learning across the region, support cross-regional integration and link-up of schemes, be a source of expertise (such as supporting the development of business cases).

Local authorities

Clearly local authorities are best placed in terms of understanding the needs and priorities of rural areas, being able to engage with rural communities and to support implementation in their areas. They also have the relevant highway powers that may be required, such as traffic regulation orders, and parking and relationships with existing operators, such as those in public transport as well as knowledge of local start-ups.

Routing grants for innovation through local authorities is an obvious way to encourage their growth. Councils have the combination of the local knowledge and skills to facilitate innovation in a rural context. As we have mentioned rural transport markets are often less appealing from a purely commercial point of view and therefore the policy challenges faced in a rural context will have different drivers to purely profits. Most transport markets operate at the scale of local authorities and

therefore councils will be best placed to intervene in areas where the market currently operates in an inefficient way but innovative new approaches could be pump primed and deliver important social goods or generate new and profitable markets in the long term.

7. Question

Do you think government can encourage the private sector to develop innovative new transport services in rural areas?

The government should be clear in the aim of innovation in rural areas. Many of the problems of rural transport are the results of market failures or the particular challenge of providing a viable transport network where settlement is less dense. The problems of rural transport have more of a social dimension. How can we provide good quality connectivity to communities that will struggle to sustain commercial transport operators without subsidy?

Simply looking to the market for innovation in this area misses the key structural challenges faced in rural transport.

Do rural communities have a right to good connectivity in order for residents to retain easy access to jobs, services and social facilities? If so, should innovation in rural transport be concerned with how the public sector can support and facilitate these links. It may be the case that new technology or innovative use of existing technologies will provide opportunities for the private sector to provide new services in a rural context. However we must also be realistic that any innovation that can make a profit in a rural context is also likely to make more profit in a denser urban environment which will make it more attractive for private sector investment.

The Government can help this by being clear in the kinds of problems that we need to solve in a rural context. Part of this will be a clear statement of the social nature of the challenge faced in a rural context. The problems to be solved may not lead to the creation of new commercially viable routes or markets for transport providers but contribute to the development of thriving rural communities. A commitment to long term support, not just trials, will be needed as rural services take longer to become commercially viable.

There are other practical steps that Government can take to encourage the private sector, including packaging less profitable areas with more profitable areas (for example, 5g rollout) and devolving existing subsidies, such as BSOG, to councils so that they can target and support innovation.

8. Question

Do you have any other comments on this call for evidence?

The Government and operators should actively promote the use of e-bikes and e-scooters in more rural settings. A recent study carried out by CREDS[vi] researchers at the University of Leeds has found that:

- Electrically-assisted bicycles (e-bikes), if used to replace car travel, have the capability to cut car carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions in England by up to 50% (about 30 million tonnes per year).
- The greatest opportunities are in rural and sub-urban settings: city dwellers

already have many low-carbon travel options, so the greatest impact would be on encouraging use outside urban areas.

- There is scope for e-bikes to help people who are most affected by rising transport costs.

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[i] Buses in Crisis Campaign for Better Transport
[ii] Age UK (2015), Missed opportunities, the impact on older people of cuts to rural bus services
[iii] LGA, Public Health England - Health and wellbeing in rural areas
[iv] The Social Mobility Commission – State of the Nation 2017
[v] The Commission for Rural Communities – Barriers to education, employment and training for young people in rural areas
[vi] CREDS: https://www.creds.ac.uk/publications/e-bike-carbon-savings-how-much-and-where/