

## Written evidence submitted by the Community Transport Association

### About the Community Transport Association

This response is submitted by the Community Transport Association (CTA) – a national membership charity working with community groups across the UK to support community-led transport.

Around 30% of CTA's 1,300 plus members are charities whose main work is the provision of community transport, while the other 70% run transport to complement their main charitable activities, such as Scout groups, Age UK and RVS branches.

Community transport provides accessible transport on a not-for-profit basis in response to local transport needs that the market has failed to meet, and often represents the only means of transport for many vulnerable and isolated people. Often, unmet needs result from:

1. Commercial and subsidised services that are unavailable, or have been reduced, withdrawn or altered because they are deemed commercially 'unprofitable'.
2. Services and vehicles that are inaccessible, particularly for those with mobility issues.

Under these circumstances, communities band together to create their own transport solutions through timetabled bus services, dial-a-ride, group hire, Wheels to Work schemes, school transport and volunteer car schemes.

Our members forge strong links with local public bodies and other civil society organisations enabling more coordinated and integrated support for local populations. This leads to benefits beyond the value to the individual passengers, with community transport central to place-based approaches to creating positive change or managing complex situations. High levels of volunteer and user involvement in the creation and delivery of services are integral to this.

### **The use of public transport and the way that people choose to travel, both locally and for longer domestic journeys**

Our response in this section seeks to draw attention to two key user groups of both public and community transport – workers and those with health challenges and disabilities. Both of these user groups often do not have access to alternative forms of transport, and we feel that it is important to highlight this issue within the wider, dominant narrative surrounding changing work patterns and improved opportunities for active travel.

Community transport exists to cater for those who are not able to access or afford conventional transport, meaning that where CT does serve the working community, these are to provide either:

- services that cater to shift work that runs at unsociable hours or, in the case of rural areas, at times that fall outside of limited and infrequent bus times; or
- Wheels to Work schemes where CTs rent out mopeds to users needing access to work or education

In other words, CT tends to provide for those who work in manual, service and hospitality industries. For example, Ilfracombe and District Community Transport collaborated with Barnstaple Job Centre in 2014 to run a timetabled bus service to enable unemployed local people to access jobs in pubs, hotels and holiday camps by running a daily return bus service to fill the gap left by poor evening transport on commercial services. Similarly, in Wales, Travol Community Transport are currently piloting a

project in collaboration with the Department for Work and Pensions and local job centres to provide transport for those needing to access factory work in the Upper Rhondda Valleys, transporting employees directly between their homes and the factory. And during the pandemic, CT Glasgow helped train drivers to reach work and operate key train services. While it is positive that the pandemic has challenged normal working practices, it should be noted that user groups such as these will be unlikely to benefit from flexible or home working arrangements, and it is important that policy changes do not overstate the universality of these benefits for the working population. In other words, these users will still need to rely on public transport and community transport services and cannot simply choose to engage with active travel or to not travel at all.

Community transport also serves a high proportion of vulnerable users by:

- providing shorter local journeys – these tend to be door-to-door journeys carried out using wheelchair accessible vehicles, and staffed with drivers and passenger assistants who are trained to assist passengers with mobility issues; or
- facilitating longer domestic journeys by providing accessible transport that connects with other forms of public transport – examples include:
  - o a timetabled bus service that connects an outlying rural village with the train station in a nearby town
  - o timetabled bus services that integrate with ferry, train and commercial bus timetables
  - o demand-responsive services which take users with mobility challenges to otherwise inaccessible commercial bus stops or stations

This user group primarily consists of older people or those with health problems, who have had to shield during the pandemic, as a result of being in a high-risk category. Prolonged isolation has unfortunately eroded the confidence of many to leave their homes and use shared transport - discomfort reinforced by government guidance encouraging people to avoid public transport to reduce transmission of the virus.

Like workers in the manual, service or hospitality industries, these passengers are unable to benefit from changed travel opportunities, and the pandemic has instead stripped them of their confidence to travel at all. This fear will, in the long term, contribute to reduced public transport patronage, which will deepen revenue losses for transport operators already shouldering the costs both of lost patronage during lockdown and of running more frequent services post-lockdown to adhere to social distancing guidelines.

To help users to overcome these emotional barriers to travelling, many in the community transport sector have implemented new processes – these include using PPE, putting in place strict cleaning and distancing procedures, and creating ‘travel bubbles’. CT operators have also maintained positive relations with their passengers over the lockdown period by staying in touch over the phone, delivering food and medicines, and continuing to provide journeys to health settings. Alongside this, friendships with CT drivers and fellow passengers has helped to reassure many that they are being transported safely, all of which has helped to gradually recover some of their confidence to travel.

In the face of reduced resources and funding, community transport operators have continued supporting community needs, combatting loneliness and isolation, and facilitating key workers and older people’s transition to a new normal – the sector’s value has never been more apparent. However, as with other transport sectors, community transport has been financially hard hit in recent

months – income has come to a near standstill, and many organisations continue to shoulder ongoing operational costs despite a significant reduction in services.

As schools reopen, communities recover and local businesses restart, this is an opportunity for local economies and communities to build back better and, as the sector has proved in recent months, community transport is a vital asset and should be central to those conversations. This is an opportunity for governments and local authorities to support organisations to diversify their services to provide for new demand, for example by:

- **increasing health transport** – CT drivers and passenger assistants are professionally trained to assist passengers with mobility issues and many vehicles are wheelchair accessible. As such, they have been invaluable in enabling users to continue reaching medical appointments during lockdown. With mounting pressure on health and social care services, this is an opportunity for CCGs, hospitals and GP surgeries to collaborate with local CT organisations to utilise spare capacity and pool resources more efficiently. Historically, this has been a challenge for CT operators so we would like to see more leadership and support from NHS England in identifying and coordinating local community run health transport and urge local authorities to assist with the building of these partnerships
- **supporting new activities** – as isolation persists, the demand for food/prescription/medicine deliveries will endure. This is an opportunity to support these services to be extended
- **generalising demand responsive transport** – while dial-a-ride service users isolate, this is an opportunity to generalise these services to provide demand responsive transport more widely, particularly for those who may be afraid to use public transport. There has been recent policy interest in demand-responsive services which has regrettably focussed more on new entrants to the market. We would like to see the Department for Transport’s Rural Mobility Fund to be revised to sustain and expand existing community-led demand responsive services.
- **filling in gaps where commercial operators have had to withdraw service**
- **relaxing regulations on notice periods for community transport operators** as they experiment with different routes and frequencies to balance new passenger demands with reduced vehicle capacity
- **recruiting new volunteers**
- **working in partnership with commercial and local authority providers, or other charities**
- **developing alternatives to volunteer car schemes**

## Central and local governmental transport priorities and finances and funding for transport

CTA welcome the UK Government’s support of the transport sector during these challenging times, namely the payment of BSOG both at pre-covid levels and monthly in advance, rather than quarterly in arrears, as well as the covid-19 Bus Service Support Grant. We also welcome the support given to the community transport sector by a number of local authorities across the UK, who have continued to honour contract and grant payments where they have been able to.

However, we have some concerns surrounding the sustainability of some of these measures. Firstly, it is our understanding that some local authorities repurposed long-term funds, some originally designated to CT, as emergency funding over the lockdown period, and it is unclear how these depleted long-term funding pots will be replenished to support services like community transport in the future. Secondly, ongoing capacity challenges to enable social distancing aboard vehicles, as the

virus persists in the foreseeable future, raises questions about the cost-efficiency of continuing to baseline BSOG payments at 2019 levels.

CTA view these challenges as opportunities to modernise how central and local governments prioritise and finance transport. As advocates of accessible and inclusive transport for all users, we support changes to funding that will broaden access for those currently excluded from the public transport network, particularly as inequalities grow in a covid-economy. As such, we recommend changing BSOG from a fuel subsidy to a subsidy for services providing access not only to those disadvantaged by age and mobility (as this is already covered by concessionary fares payments), but also those living in rural areas which do not benefit from commercial transport investment, and those on low incomes who rely more than other social groups on public transport to get them both to where they need and want to be.

Enabling these groups to access essential services, leisure activities, family and friends, and local high streets will be vital to kickstarting the economy and rebuilding communities.

Moreover, with social distancing measures placing pressures on capacity, and patronage being affected by government guidance and reduced passenger confidence, it is more important than ever that resources are used efficiently and in a joined-up way. As such, we re-emphasise the need to adopt a Total Transport approach to services, in which community transport is included. Particularly in light of the role that community transport has played during the pandemic, it is evident that the sector should have a voice in the decision-making process of local transport networks, and it is the role of central and local government to facilitate and enable this.

To summarise, we recommend:

- A political will to see rural areas served by meaningful public transport provision, offering good levels of accessibility and opportunities for travel choice, supported by repurposed BSOG funds and a revised approach to the Rural Mobility Fund
- Better coordination in local areas between providers and stakeholders, in which local communities are fully involved.
- A comprehensive policy and strategy to deliver this vision, backed by funding to make it happen (recognising that rural transport cannot be a commercial proposition until a critical mass of people can be encouraged to use it).
- A 'total transport' approach must be adopted, with two different aspects: (1) Co-ordinated commissioning and planning of services; (2) Co-ordinated delivery of different types of transport provision.
- A mixed economy of provision, drawing on commercial, public and voluntary sectors, offering a range of different types of service – fixed route / demand responsive; cars / taxis / minibuses / buses; volunteers / employed staff.
- Support from NHS England in identifying and coordinating local community run health transport and local authorities to assist with the building of these partnerships.
- Services form a coherent, well presented and promoted network that can be easily understood and used.
- A long-term and consistent approach is adopted providing a consistent, stable and reliable network. However, there is sufficient flexibility to change and develop provision in respond to changing needs and emerging demands.

## **The devolution of transport policy-making responsibilities and powers**

The CTA support transport localism – we believe that local communities are best placed to understand local needs and resources and are therefore most able to find the most efficient and effective transport solutions, as demonstrated by the success of community transport schemes set up and operated by local people. The value of local transport services has been underlined in recent months by the way in which community transport has continued providing for needs to those shielding and isolating, who would otherwise have had no other means of getting their essentials or having social contact. As such, we welcome measures to devolve transport policy-making responsibilities and powers and view it as an important step to finding transport solutions that work best for local communities.

The devolution of responsibilities and powers will be particularly important to ensuring that services can continue in a way that works best for local people as we intermittently enter into local lockdowns across the UK.

## **The resilience of the transport system for future crises**

The pandemic has highlighted the fragility of our transport system to withstanding crises and revealed gaps in funding for northern and rural areas. When transport services outside of London were stripped down to a minimum to reduce costs for commercial companies, many in outlying and rural areas were stranded without service and had to rely either on the private car to access essentials, or on local community transport operators that stepped in to provide for needs where commercial services had been reduced, withdrawn or altered.

By contrast, in London, passengers under 18 were able to benefit from free tube travel for a period, and it is speculated that TfL will be launching a new scheme, First Ride Free, that provides those who have not used the public transport network since lockdown began with free first journeys. Not only will this help to rejuvenate TfL's depressed revenue, but also encourage users to resume travel, demonstrating how locally controlled transport systems can effectively implement measures that best serve the interests of passengers.

We believe that this pandemic is an opportunity for the UK Government to re-prioritise their funding choices to address this disparity in provision. In particular, enabling people to access key services and see their family and loved ones will be more meaningful in rebuilding a post-covid economy and world than big infrastructure projects, such as HS2. As such, we support the rechannelling of funds away from large infrastructure projects towards supporting domestic transport provision, particularly in northern and rural areas.

## **The decarbonisation of transport and the capability to meet net zero carbon emissions targets by 2050**

The pandemic has further rejuvenated private car use, which will have long-term implications on the ability of the UK to meet net zero carbon emissions targets by 2050. The shift away from public

transport use can be attributed to two key causes – earlier government guidance encouraging people to travel by private car where possible, and passengers’ fears over travelling in shared spaces.

As such, to undo this setback, we consider that achieving modal shift to shared and public transport requires more radical government measures that will genuinely disincentivise car use and change public attitudes towards public transport.

These suggestions are not new ones; rather, the pandemic has given greater urgency to earlier policy debates surrounding modal shift and decarbonisation. Where passengers were already being discouraged from private car use, there will need to be stricter measures to ensure that it happens; where passengers were already deterred from using public transport, more work will need to be done to regain their confidence. Clean Air Zones, for example, while an ostensibly positive step to reducing carbon emissions, in practice can penalise shared transport modes. In Sheffield, for example, only larger vehicles such as CT minibuses and buses are charged to enter the zones, while private cars can enter for free, which is counterintuitive to promoting shared transport. Measures such as these would benefit from greater direction and greater depth in planning for unforeseen outcomes.

Meanwhile, to help passengers regain confidence to travel, there is an opportunity for operators to implement measures recently taken by community transport operators, and to work with the sector to create a joined-up transport network that gets people to where they want and need to be. Pandemic-proofing protocols, such as cleaning, using PPE and conducting risk assessments and implementing social distancing and travel bubbles on board the vehicles, have been fundamental to re-growing patronage on community transport services, even with the sector serving the user group at greatest risk of contracting the virus and therefore often with the lowest confidence to leave their homes. Some community transport organisations have also worked with their local services and local authority to become the sole providers of transport for specific social groups, thereby providing essential journeys in a safe and secure way. For users of conventional transport services to feel safe, measures such as these will need to be both replicated and communicated to ensure that people feel confident that there are systems in place to protect their wellbeing.

## **Innovation and technological reform within transport**

Much of the technological development within transport (at both system level and operator level) appears to be primarily concerned with making improvements for people who already have significant agency over their travel options, and can choose how they travel based on factors such as convenience and cost. Initiatives such as Mobility as a Service can make improvements for this group by efficiently curating and combining their choices for them.

We are principally concerned about people who lack such agency and rely on transport being provided to them, having been excluded from conventional services owing mostly to issues of mobility or rurality. This group would also include the unbanked (data from 2019 says there are still just over a million people who lack access to their own transactional bank account<sup>1</sup>) and those without a smartphone. Whilst 79% of UK adults own a smartphone 27% of people aged 55-64 do not have access to the internet via a mobile phone and for the 65+ this figure rises to 60%.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> FINANCIAL INCLUSION ANNUAL MONITORING BRIEFING PAPER 2019, University of Birmingham

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.finder.com/uk/mobile-internet-statistics>

We are concerned that these groups would not be able to enjoy the benefits of many technological reforms, such as smart ticketing, because they (and the services they use) work on a pay as you go basis using cash; meaning they pay a premium for their travel as a consequence. Using technology in this way must not penalise people who do not have access to it, or to services that use it.

Providers catering for this group, predominantly community transport, are generally small, local independent operators and would not ordinarily have the technology or in-house expertise to participate in MaaS platforms or any other comparable activity. Nor do they have the efficiencies of large commercial operators to work at scale to build platforms from which to run a multitude of services. Some operators have introduced cashless payment methods in response to Covid-19 which shows there is an appetite for modernisation.

To some extent, app-based technology used by larger providers in the DRT space simulates the localised/personalised approach of a typical CT operator, so those operators have been able to get by without it. However, if we wish for commissioners and passengers to not have to choose between a high-tech commercial approach or a low-tech community approach, which delivers social value, action is required.

CTA proposes that the Department for Transport supports a project to address the tech-deficit in community provision by creating resources nationally which can be adopted by local community providers.

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