

Sustainable Transport Herefordshire



The Country Bus Its Place in Our Future

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The Country Bus: Its place in our future

1. The Background

Old fashioned, outdated, unreliable, archaic, a thing of the past—that was the view of one local Herefordshire councillor back in 2012. He was talking about the humble bus. The result, a local transport authority that abandoned the omnibus as a means of transport for all; the word ‘omni’ just did not register and yet the same authority was to publish its Local Transport Plan 2012-2031 with a key objective to ‘*Provide a good quality transport network for all users*’.

These are fine words without substance. Between 2010/11 and 2017/18 Herefordshire Council’s support for local bus services declined by a staggering 70.33%. The West Midlands regional average was 41.96%.

The result of this dramatic cut in support was predictable. By 2017/18 Herefordshire had fallen to fourth from the bottom in the table of local bus passenger journeys per head as published in the government’s annual report of bus statistics. The bus operators, faced with the disappearance of an important element of their income, reacted as expected with wholesale withdrawal of evening and Sunday services, reductions in day time frequencies and pruning of traditional market day services.

The downward spiral continued to accelerate until it seemed the bus was going to be faced with extinction in this rural part of England. The social effect went unheeded by a council intent on promoting the car as the only way to travel. The young and the elderly were and continue to be the biggest sufferers. Rural depopulation by the young in search of employment became a fact of life. The largest proportion of out migration from the county occurs in the 18-35 age bracket (*Source Population of Herefordshire 2018: Herefordshire Council*). For the elderly there arose rural isolation with difficulty in accessing shops, post offices, doctors, hospitals, relations and a deprivation of the all important conversations with fellow passengers .

The country bus is in danger of becoming an idyllic story from the past as the government concentrates its efforts on public transport in the urban conurbations. Capital grants for new low emission buses go mostly to the

new city regions and large urban concentrations. The deep rural areas of England are consigned to the world of the car. Requests for special measures for rural areas have largely gone unheeded and the decline in rural public transport continues.

But, and this is a big but, there is a growing awareness that not all is well in the countryside. There is a growing realisation that the internal combustion engine and the car as the embodiment of personal mobility has a finite life. The advent of the electric car may not be the panacea that was hoped and the cost of private motoring is set to rise dramatically. Many other factors in the future of personal mobility are beginning to creep in.

2. A New Dimension

June 2019 saw a new dimension reach the news - Loneliness Awareness Week. Claire Haigh, the Chief Executive of Greener Journeys summed up this dimension.

'What did we learn? That loneliness is now endemic and action needs to come not just from the individual but also, most importantly, from the community they live in. That we may have thought loneliness was a problem for the elderly, but in fact young people are particularly hard hit. That public transport has a vital role to play in tackling this corrosive social epidemic - a role which is currently underexploited.'

That the UK is suffering from a loneliness epidemic is beyond doubt. Two thirds of us admit to at least sometimes feeling lonely and more than nine million adults in the UK are often lonely. 13% of people in the UK feel lonely every day.

The health risks are well documented. Loneliness is as bad for your health as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day, carries greater health risks than obesity and increases risk of mortality by 29%. Lonely people are more likely to suffer from depression, dementia, diabetes, heart condition and strokes.

Reduced opportunities for face-to-face contact with others are a major part of the problem. People are finding that a network of digital connections are not replacement for real human interaction. At the same point they may be losing the skills or opportunity to forge those contacts.

The experience of using public transport provides opportunities to connect with others. A third of people in the UK have deliberately got the bus to have some human contact. For some people the bus driver might be the only person they speak to on a day when they don't speak to anyone close to them'.

The reason for quoting Claire Haigh is important. It identifies the bus as an important part of the individual and community fabric of our lives. It moves the bus importantly out of that singular economic compartment it has been locked into by transport authorities, central government and transport planners. This move is as important to rural society and economy as it is elsewhere in the UK fabric.

3. A Herefordshire Example: The Happy Bus

My friend Deano calls it the Happy Bus. He was already on it when I joined him for the Thursday's only service from Ledbury to Ross-on-Wye. I soon realised why Deano calls it the Happy Bus. Those already on it at Ledbury were joined by others at Much Marcle and at various points through the lanes up over Perrystone Hill and down to Old Gore cross roads and the back way into Ross via Brampton Abbots. There were cheery good mornings and the murmur of conversation as pleasantries and no doubt gossip was exchanged.

The following day I took the Fridays only bus from Ledbury to Leominster via Bosbury, Cradley, Bishops Frome, Bromyard, Bredenbury and Steens Bridge. Nearly a full load from Bromyard raised the noise level considerably and I was able to catch up with the local Bromyard news to good effect!

Both these services have so far escaped the drastic slaughter of our country bus services nationwide. Perhaps Herefordshire is luckier than most counties in retaining a very small proportion of its once extensive rural public transport network.

The issue of rural accessibility and public transport provision has been around for some time. In 1984 TEST (Transport & Environment Studies) published a report 'After the Bus' commissioned by Friends of the Earth. In that report it was stated:

'The rural accessibility dilemma has been well documented. There is general

agreement as to the nature of the problem – in the first place services have become increasingly centralised in larger population centres. Secondly, the rise in car ownership has led to declining patronage for bus services, and thus to service reductions and higher fares which have contributed to a downward spiral where more people use cars. Yet, there remain many people without any means of transport for journeys longer than those that can be made on foot or by pedal cycle – always assuming these people are physically able to move about in those ways. A further significant social change has been the decline in agricultural employment and the influx of retired and economically inactive people into the countryside, as well as those buying second homes.

Villages could become dormitories, with many retirement and second homes. But retirement connotes ageing and the eventual inability to drive. Less affluent retired people may then have to join the car-less and migrate to urban areas. The alternative for car-less villagers is to watch their standard of living continually decline’.



The ‘Happy Bus’ resting at the Ross-on-Wye terminus before its next rural journey to the small village of Llangarron on the Monmouthshire border.

4. What can be done?

An important milestone has recently been reached. After years of campaigning by the Campaign for Better Transport, the government has announced it will deliver a National Bus Strategy in 2020. It is important that the country bus gets a good hearing with positive action in such a strategy. That Local Transport Authorities such as Herefordshire Council take a lead in this is all important.

This in itself calls for a Herefordshire Bus Strategy which includes important items such as:

- ◆ A minimum level of service for all rural communities.
- ◆ A strategy of tiered rural services interchanging with main inter-urban services at specifically designed nodal interchange points. This will strengthen the links between the market towns and Hereford as the county's main centre.
- ◆ Strengthening the possibilities for bus/rail interchange at the county's railway stations.
- ◆ Multi modal/operator ticketing; reduced price bus travel for the young linked to employment opportunities.
- ◆ The reintroduction of a County wide timetable booklet and the introduction of digital timetable information displays at important nodal locations in towns and country.
- ◆ Putting buses at the heart of air quality in Herefordshire's towns and the city. This means a proactive bid by Herefordshire Council for Government grant for low or nil emission buses to be used on specifically designed town and city bus networks as part of local transport plans to reduce traffic congestion.

Central to all these is the need to rebuild trust between Herefordshire Council and bus operators, both existing and those that may be encouraged into the business of **providing a quality transport network for all**. Quality partnerships, whether voluntary or otherwise are actively encouraged by

central government. It is time Herefordshire Council took them at their word.

Like it or not the country bus has a place to play in the future.

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.

For a full list of our reports in PDF format contact:

Gareth Calan Davies (ghal@btinternet.com)

Carole Protherough (protheroughcarole32@gmail.com)

info@herefordshiresustainabletransportgroup.org.uk