

Rural buses

Case studies from around the country show that cuts to rural bus services have devastating effects

NORTH WEST

Mrs Argent lives in Congleton, Cheshire. She is retired and physically incapacitated. She depended on the old bus service that ran through Rode Heath to Congleton (number 315). This bus used to run along Ullswater Road where she lives. Mrs Argent cannot walk far, so her old bus stop and bus route were the only ones she could use. Her medical problems mean that she needs to visit her doctor and the local hospital regularly.

Cheshire County Council changed the local bus services in August 2007. Mrs Argent now has to rely on the 76 bus which only runs until lunchtime. (She can't get the new 315 because the bus stop is too far away for her to walk to.) This means she has no public transport options in the afternoon or evenings. Journeys to the local shops, the pharmacy and the GP are now much more difficult, as are trips beyond Congleton. The taxi is an expensive option, and it can be difficult to get one at the times when she needs to travel.

Mrs Argent says the new services are very inconvenient. "The journey back home takes 55 minutes. A normal shopping trip now takes two hours."

In practice, the cutting of the number 315 means that Mrs Argent will have to use taxis – which cost more – and cannot leave the house as much as she used to. She is socially isolated and has no family in the area. She says, "My health has deteriorated because daily life is much more physically demanding."

Mrs Vaughan has collected 200 signatures in a petition asking for Blackburn Council to reinstate the bus service from Blackburn to Warrenside Close. In April 2007, the council sold municipally owned Blackburn Transport to a bus company which reviewed bus routes over the following months. The frequency on the Blackburn to Warrenside Close section was cut from 15 minutes to 120 minutes (two-hourly) in September 2007. Elderly people who are unable to drive are now isolated. Many schoolchildren used to rely on the bus to get to school. Below are quotes Mrs Vaughan has collected from bus users who rely on the service:

- **Mrs D B:** "I am 83 years old and I have been using this bus service for over 20 years. It is awful that just months after Blackburn Transport is privatised they stop the service with hardly any warning. I like to keep active and meet my friends in town, I don't want to spend all the time looking at my watch and worrying about catching the two-hourly bus. I feel like I am going to be almost housebound and my independence limited."

- **Mrs P:** "I have been using this bus since 1978 when it started. I know a lot of people who catch it and we have become friends. Stopping the bus is terrible; a lot of us old people rely on it."
- **Mrs A:** "My teenage daughter and her friends catch the bus to school. This new two-hourly one isn't due to start 'til after they need to be at school! We are not sure how she will get their now. I suppose one of us will have to alter our working pattern and take her by car. As at least 20 pupils use the bus to go to school that will mean 20 more cars on the school run!"
- **Mrs V:** "At the moment I share my car with my husband and my youngest son. This is only possible because we rely on the bus service to provide additional and regular transport. Without a regular bus service we will be forced to buy another car. This is not something we want to do from an environmental or economic point."

Mr Turner-Bishop lives in Preston and his wife's family live a couple of miles outside, at their farm in Chipping. Last year, Lancashire County Council cut the subsidised part of the Sunday bus service between Preston and Chipping (number 4). The new service (number 2) now stops at Longridge instead of continuing to Chipping. Mr Turner-Bishop and his wife don't have a car, and he used to enjoy travelling out to visit his in-laws on their farm, which was a two-and-a-half mile walk from the Chipping bus stop. Now if they want to travel on a Sunday to a family event like a recent christening, they have to travel to Longridge on the Preston-Longridge bus, before trying to get a lift or a taxi for the remaining five miles. They've tried taking folding bikes but some bus drivers won't allow it.

Mr Turner-Bishop says, "Bus cuts like this one mean that the beautiful Ribble Valley countryside is out of bounds for non-motorists on Sundays and bank holidays. For people with families in the area it means more expense and also having to be obliged to kind car users for lifts."

The cut is also frustrating for people who live in Chipping who can't get to Preston's shops on Sundays. People from Chipping are also dependent on taxis or private cars if they want to catch trains from Preston on Sundays. Mr Turner-Bishop concludes, "these cuts may seem minor but they undermine the reliability and security of a network and so reduce its credibility overall."

NORTH EAST

In November 2006, bus services from Shildon to Bishop Auckland and Darlington were re-routed by the bus company. There is now no bus service down West Road in Shildon, and people living in that area can't get a bus to the Shildon town centre. Many of the people affected by the cut are elderly and they can't manage the long walk into Shildon. It's now difficult and expensive for them to travel to Shildon, or onwards to Bishop Auckland or Darlington. Shildon town councillor Les Iddon said, "The company thinks more about shareholders than about the travelling public. People now have to get taxis, which cost at least £5 for a single, just to get into Shildon and visit the local shops."

YORKSHIRE & THE HUMBER

In July 2006, North Yorkshire County Council cut the subsidy for the x84 service from Ilkley to Skipton. This meant there were no more Sunday or evening services between these two sizeable market towns. The local Campaign for Better Transport group studied the impacts of the cut on people's lives and discovered that many people were seriously affected:

- **Miss F** from Skipton has a 96 year old partner who stays in the Dales Care Centre in Draughton that until July she could visit daily. Faced with taxi fares of £6 each way, she could no longer visit her partner on Sundays and Bank Holidays. “As I have only my OAP as support I had to remain in Skipton feeling angry and frustrated to be cut off from a village only three miles away.” The young staff of the care centre also had to put up with major inconvenience as a result of the cut because most of them don't have a car.
- **Mrs S** of Addingham said “My parents are elderly now and I cannot go to Skipton on an evening or Sunday if they need me. My parents have also used that bus to visit me over the last 40 years and can now not get here on a Sunday unless they pay £20 taxi fare to get here and back home.”

The cut means people without cars have reduced leisure opportunities. Visiting family and friends, shopping, concerts, evening classes, nights out, onward journeys by rail were all difficult or impossible for people who used to rely on the bus service. Reduced tourist activities were another consequence of the bus cut – walking, scenic trips, and visiting tourist attractions all became problematic.

Some members of the local Campaign for Better Transport group decided to start up a social enterprise to run the service themselves. They were awarded sustainable development funding to do this, but this money will run out at the end of December. Colin Speakman from the local group says, “This example highlights the need for secure and steady funding for rural buses.”

WEST MIDLANDS

Mr Tonks volunteers at Russell's Hall Hospital in Dudley. “The bus company cancelled the link between the hospital and the rural village of Wombourne, because it wasn't making a profit,” he says. Wombourne residents visiting the hospital by bus had to change buses in Wall Heath. Buses from Wall Heath went every half-hour.

Mr Tonks says, “For six months, people from Wombourne couldn't get the bus here so many people drove instead. The service was cut for a long time, and so we lost people; they gave up on the bus.”

At the same time, three local hospitals were closed or changed as part of a PFI deal (two were converted into day centres) so everyone in the area has to go to Russell's Hall Hospital. Mr Tonks says, “Limited hospital parking space means cars are still parked in people's driveways and patients struggle to find a space. And the last thing that anxious patients want is to have to find a car parking space.”

Eventually, Staffordshire County Council reinstated the direct link between Wombourne and the hospital, but some local people had already given up on the bus. Mr Tonks says “I'm happy that the Council has decided to fund this daytime link but there is still no direct service from Wombourne to the hospital at evenings and on Sundays. This example shows why we need good rural bus links. More long-term funding and commitment is required from government to support rural areas. People need to be given real transport options.”

EAST MIDLANDS

Mr Evans lives in Shepshed, five miles from Loughborough, East Midlands. He is currently in the process of completing a report that will point out flaws in bus services and bus cuts in the Charnwood and North West Leicestershire region. Mr Evans says that, “the bus system in Charnwood and North West Leicestershire is good for accessing city centres; however it is quite the opposite concerning some rural areas”. He has

specifically highlighted the Loughborough – Newtown Linford bus route (number 120) which was cut by the county council last year in October. This had an effect on parishes along the route, who complained about poorer access due to the bus cuts.

Charnwood Forest receives over 1.5 million day visitors a year. Since the cancellation of the 120 bus, two buses (54 and 123) only skirt the area now and people must walk to gain access to the forest. In addition, villages only a couple of miles from the main A6 cannot access a new rural leisure centre. The only way to reach it is to catch the bus into Loughborough and out again, which would be costly and problematic.

Mr Evans concluded that “the buses are not good for getting from one village community to another”.

EAST OF ENGLAND

Mrs Woodhouse is a senior citizen who lives in Lakenheath, Suffolk. In the first week of June last year, Suffolk County Council cancelled the 292 bus which ran from Lakenheath to Ely. This was the only bus that gave her immediate access to the shopping town of Ely. She no longer drives, and the bus enabled her to meet friends and go to the local market in Ely. Now she says that “villages have been cut off from one another”.

Her friend has been affected even worse than she has by the bus cuts. She is over 80 years old and has to pay over £12 to get a taxi to visit friends in neighbouring villages.

Mrs Woodhouse said that in Eriswell, some people have to walk over three quarters of a mile on a very busy and dangerous road to get to the nearest bus stop. This is made worse by the fact that many people are elderly and have to carry large bags of shopping on the way back from Ely.

Mrs Woodhouse is left with only expensive and unsuitable options to get into Ely and see her friends. She believes that a service which ran during Ely market hours would be very popular among the older population. It would give her a chance to socialise and enjoy the company of her friends. She concludes that “the council can’t run empty buses, but they need feedback from people. No one asks people what they need, they now feel isolated”.

SOUTH WEST

Mr Potts lives in Polperro in Cornwall. In May 2007 the 81A bus service from Polperro to Plymouth was largely withdrawn by the bus company. The service follows the route of the Cornish coastal path, via the coastal villages of Seaton and Downderry. On a Saturday, a journey from Polperro to Seaton previously took 40 minutes for a journey of nine miles. The simplest journey now takes two hours. Passengers must travel 10 miles to Liskeard, wait for 45 minutes and then travel nine miles from Liskeard to Seaton. They have to buy two tickets for the two parts of the journey, which are run by different companies.

People used the bus service for leisure and tourist activities, and for visiting friends. The bus made it easy for people to walk sections of the well-used Cornish coastal path or visit the coastal villages. Mr Potts believes that Cornwall County Council's strategy of encouraging leisure and tourism by public transport means they should subsidise this service. He says, “This bus service was particularly popular with our many thousands of visitors who come to enjoy the beautiful Cornwall countryside each year.”

SOUTH EAST

Mrs Swain lives in Stodmarsh, five miles outside Canterbury, Kent. In August, her local postbus service for villages between Canterbury and Grove (301-3) was stopped by Royal Mail. (Postbus services pick people up and drop them off with the mail in rural areas, where there is little alternative.) Mrs Swain is a senior citizen, like many of the people who used the bus. She doesn't want to drive because of her age and the difficulties of parking.

Stodmarsh is a very small, isolated village and the postbus offered a chance for residents to see their friends from neighbouring villages. Mrs Swain has friends who are also stuck because of the cuts, and a couple of them have decided to move house as a result. The local people fought to get Royal Mail to run this postbus 10 years ago, and now they need to start fighting again.

It's a two- or three-mile walk or drive to Wickhambreaux, the next village. This is very tough for an elderly lady. The only other options are a limited dial-a-ride service which only goes to the supermarket and should ideally be booked seven days in advance, or a taxi which costs just under £25 return from Canterbury. Also, Mrs Swain would have to walk quite far just for access to a bus service.

The county council is considering helping to pay for the minibus service. However, in the meantime, Mrs Swain is stuck. "Royal Mail is happy to leave us all stranded," she says. "I feel like a prisoner in my own home."

1 October 2007

Campaign for Better Transport

12-18 Hoxton Street London N1 6NG

info@bettertransport.org.uk, www.bettertransport.org.uk

Campaign for Better Transport Ltd is a company limited by guarantee, registered in England and Wales (1512347)