



# North Pembrokeshire Transport Forum Fforwm Trafnidiaeth Gogledd Penfro

## The Role of Transport in Rural Development

### Introduction - The Transport Context in Urban Settings

Members of the Executive Committee of the North Pembrokeshire Transport Forum were asked to consider the Role of Transport in Rural Development in January 2013, and this is the result of their deliberations, drawn together by Emma Lewis, Operations Co-ordinator of Green Dragon Community Transport (Preseli Rural Transport Association).

In cities and towns, where many of our population, decision-makers, employment and major facilities (main hospitals, sports stadia, Government offices, etc.) are located, most people can get wherever they want to go by bus, train, bicycle, on foot or by car.

Households with more than one adult or older child usually don't need a second car (or a car at all) to carry out their shopping, employment, medical appointments, education facilities, leisure opportunities or social events. If one adult takes the car to work, the rest of the household walk, bus or cycle to school, the shops, a second or third job, appointments, relatives and places like the park, the leisure centre, the library or the cinema.

Tougher economic conditions and the rising prices of motoring are unlikely to cost many people in urban areas their jobs, their ability to go shopping or the possibility of visiting friends or family.

Families and friends are able to support each other in illness and older age. Families without a car available when support is needed can often visit by bus or on foot to help out when needed. Isolation happens, but not often through lack of access to a car.

Likewise, businesses in urban areas are unlikely to struggle to find a range of employees, unless they are looking for very specialist skills or knowledge. Many people will be able to reach the workplace, even on a shift basis, with or without their own transport and, similarly, businesses dealing directly with the public (from shops to pubs, solicitors to dentists) have access to plenty of customers, with or without their own transport.

### Transport and Development in Rural Areas

In rural areas, the picture is different. This is not due to a difference in the people; it's just geography. For most people it is too far to walk to the shops, doctors, leisure centre and, in many cases, to visit relatives. Most country roads don't have any kind of footpath or lighting. Cycling is an option for some people on some journeys, but most country roads are not safe for cyclists and places people want to or need to visit are not often close enough to make cycling a viable option for our daily and weekly needs. Buses are often not viable in very rural areas, and with cuts to Government funding, financially supported services have to be cut too. Where buses do run, services are unlikely to run in the evening and there is often nowhere sheltered to wait.

People and businesses in rural areas have the same wants and needs as people in urban areas, but unless you have a car in a rural area you are unlikely to be able to access many of the goods and services we all need.

Even rural centres – bigger villages and small towns – now have limited public transport, and accessing them from the surrounding area is still difficult on foot or by bicycle as the distances are often significant and safe roads for pedestrians and cyclists don't usually start until you're actually in the town or village.

Rural businesses are less likely to be able to freely access workers, as those without access to a car may find some areas completely inaccessible, and other areas accessible only at restricted times of the day.

Put simply, people and businesses in rural areas without ready access to a car whenever it's needed suffer lack of opportunity economically, socially and in accessing health and care services.

Worse, due to an ageing population and the increasing cost of motoring threatening car access to more households, the situation is getting worse with no foreseeable possibility of a change in this trend. Closing services and facilities due to Government funding cuts have disproportionately more impact in rural areas where the next service or facility may be completely out of reach.

There are a number of ways of addressing these issues. A trite answer is to move everyone into the bigger towns and cities, but there isn't enough accommodation in our towns and cities for the people who already live there; if this is the answer, it's a long term one.

A second option is to provide more mobile goods and services. Many people in rural areas shop mostly online, but this threatens local businesses, reduces choice and removes the opportunity for social interaction and community development. Some people e-commute, which works well for some people, but increases isolation, severely limits job opportunities and does not achieve the same social benefits most working people enjoy. Mobile libraries, hairdressers and so on provide excellent services, but services delivered in this way are necessarily limited, and do not provide all the social benefits of visiting the premises and meeting other people, finding the full range of services, etc.

The third option is to invest properly in rural transport, through supported public transport, community transport, car clubs, scooter hire for youngsters, Dial-A-Rides for the older and more frail and other Community Transport solutions such as Country Cars, community minibus hire, taxi and car sharing and other local and national schemes for those without access to a car when they need to travel.

There is much national and local Government rhetoric regarding equal access to services, ensuring equal opportunities for all, adults and children, in education, employment, business development, social and health care and so on. None of these can be addressed without proper access to transport in rural areas, where the vast majority of the deficit lies. There is no point in having the best hospital, factory or school if people cannot get to them and home again safely and affordably.

Proper transport provision enables rural communities to be economically sustainable, reduces isolation, ensures access to goods and services, reduces mental health problems and difficulty in accessing care for physical health problems. It ensures proper access for people and businesses to earn money and contribute to the economy. Things most urban areas have already, intrinsically, and that in rural areas are becoming bigger problems which are getting harder and more expensive to resolve.

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