

Agenda Item	5.
Report No	CPB/16/21



Community Planning Board – 4 November 2021

**Highland CPP – Transport Problems and Opportunities:
Evidence from Community Consultations**

Introduction

This paper has been produced by the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan (HOIP) – Infrastructure Group to identify public transport issues that are frequently raised by communities within the Highland CPP area. The evidence contained within this paper is intended to help shape priority actions by the Highland CPP in relation to transport.

This has been a desk-based exercise that draws upon the findings of a variety of available community consultation documents and plans, summarising the main transport-related themes and issues from these. While community/ locality plans were not available for all parts of the Highland Council area, a number have been published and provide a rich source of evidence for identifying many of the key transport problems and opportunities that are common to a number of communities.

Transport-related findings have been considered from the findings of community engagement and surveys that have informed locality plans/ community plans/ engagement reports for the following locations:

- Ardgay and District Community Plan (2019)
- Assynt Community Plan (2019)
- Brora Locality Plan (2019)
- Caol Draft Locality Plan (2019)
- Creich Locality Plan (2019)
- Dornoch Community Plan (2019)
- Durness Community Plan (2019)
- Edderton Community Plan (2019)
- Fort William Locality Plan (2019)
- Golspie Locality Plan (2019)
- Helmsdale Locality Plan (2019)
- Kinlochbervie Locality Plan (2019)
- Lairg Community Plan (2019)
- Mid Ross Community Partnership Survey (2019)
- Melness-Tongue-Skerray Community Plan (2019)
- Merkinch Community Plan (2019)
- North Sutherland Community Plan (2019)
- Nairn and Nairnshire Locality Plan (2019)
- Rogart Community Plan (2019)

- Rural Caithness & Sutherland Community Consultation Report (2019)
- Scourie Community Plan (2019)
- Sutherland Wide Community Engagement (composite of all community surveys undertaken in Sutherland) (2019)
- Thurso Community Consultation (2019)
- Wick Community Consultation Report (2019)

These reports are available via the Highland CPP webpage: [Local Community Partnerships - Highland CPP](#).

This paper also compares findings from the community consultations to other relevant literature and, finally, advises that Highland CPP endorses recommendations set out in HITRANS's recent report 'Rural Bus Service Support and Funding Case for Change' (2021).

Problems and Opportunities

Within many of the available community and locality plan documents, **the frequency and availability of public transport** is cited as an issue:

- In Sutherland this was emphasised within each of the various plans i.e. the communities of Creich, Golspie, Helmsdale, Ardgay, Assynt, Dornoch, Durness, Edderton, and Melness-Tongue-Skerray, Rogart, Scourie and North Sutherland.
- Likewise, survey data for Mid-Ross and Rural Caithness also shows that the frequency and regularity of services is considered a priority issue for these communities.
- Within the Sutherland Wide Community Engagement Report, it is shown that across the various community surveys in the CCP the average rating for public transport was 2.8 (out of 7), based on views from research participants. In the Mid-Ross locality plan public transport was rated 3.1 (out of 7). In both instances, this represented the lowest ranking of all the community topics that were surveyed.
- In towns, frequency, availability and reliability of services was also raised during community engagement. In Thurso and Fort William communities raised the lack of evening and weekend services. In the Wick locality, timetabling and reliability of bus services is highlighted as a concern.

Although the community consultation evidence, particularly in more remote communities, stress that the frequency and availability of public transport is an issue, there is not a detailed breakdown of how this impacts on particular journey purposes. However, within the various community/ locality plans there is data which indicates, unsurprisingly, that this impacts in a variety of ways e.g. access to employment/ education, services (including health) and social/ leisure opportunities. Regarding **access to employment**:

- The Rural Caithness community survey highlighted that unsuitable public transport times to Thurso and Wick is impacting on the ability of people to gain work.
- In Sutherland, communities of Brora, Golspie and Dornoch stressed the general need to increase public transport opportunities for people commuting to work and education.

In terms of **access to further/ higher education**:

- The Rural Caithness community survey found that access to higher education is extremely difficult via public transport. Students studying in Thurso have to allow two hours to get to college and are not home until 7.30 in the evenings.

- In Sutherland, community/locality plans for Brora, Golspie and Dornoch all indicated that frequency and availability of transport links affected the ability to commute for work and education. Also, the Helmsdale community identified the lack of transport to Thurso College as a major problem.
- In Mid-Ross, the community indicated the need for more direct routes to different areas of Inverness, including UHI Campus.

Several of the community surveys and plans note that insufficient frequency and availability affects the ability of people to access local services. In particular, **accessing health services**, and these communities include:

- In Sutherland, issues around hospital transport was frequently stated by respondents to the community surveys in Brora, Edderton, Lairg and Scourie.
- In Rural Caithness, unsuitable public transport times to the towns, was impacting the ability of people to attend health care and other appointments.
- In Wick, it was raised that available transport is often unsuitable for disabled travellers having to travel to Inverness to see hospital consultants.
- In Mid-Ross, the community indicated the need for more direct routes to different areas of Inverness, including to Raigmore.

Access to other specific types of services was highlighted as being problematic in some of the locality plans. For example:

- In Helmsdale, banking, a local service point and shops are insufficient or absent altogether meaning residents have to travel significant distances in order to access them. The frequency and the times of availability of public transport are therefore problematic.
- In Melvich, transport required for day care services is an issue.
- In Thurso, transportation to the outlying areas of the town were difficult if a large shop was needed from a supermarket. More broadly, the Thurso community consultation identified the need to better promote Thurso Town Circular Bus Route to families and young people so that they access shops and services in the town centre from housing estates.

There is evidence of transport being a barrier to **accessing leisure opportunities and social interaction**:

- The Rural Caithness community consultation found that people becoming more socially isolated was one of the numerous ways in which people are disadvantaged when reliant on public transport links that are insufficient.
- The Brora and Fort William plans both also noted that limited access to transport has contributed to feelings of loneliness and isolation for some.
- In Mid Ross, the community has highlighted the need for a more direct bus route to areas of Inverness, including for accessing leisure services such as the Aquadome and to the retail parks.

The **cost of public transport** was raised as an issue within some of the locality plans:

- The Sutherland Wide Community Engagement report noted that fare prices were a general issue.
- Mid Ross and Wick communities also raised concerns around the affordability of transport services.

There was evidence from the various community surveys and engagement sessions that **communities are open to new forms of transport provision as a means to potentially mitigate transport challenges**, such as exploring community transport options, car share schemes and making use of digital opportunities (e.g. Demand Responsive Transport (DRT)/MaaS).

Regarding **community transport**:

- Many of the communities in Sutherland signalled that they are open to exploring community transport, including communities in Golspie, Ardgay, Dornoch, Rogart, Scourie and all three communities in North Sutherland (Bettyhill, Strathy and Melvich).
- The Melness-Tongue and Skerry locality plan found there was a large degree of satisfaction with the services provided in the area by Transport for Tongue (T4T), while the Durness Bus was also considered to be positive for the community.
- The Mid Ross Community Survey found that there was some interest in exploring ways to create more competition on bus routes e.g. community transport schemes and on-demand services.

Regarding the use of **digital technologies and on-demand services**:

- As noted above, in Mid Ross there is interest in exploring the potential for on-demand buses.
- In Sutherland, the Creich Locality Plan raised that utilising technology to bring services closer to people are all routes worthy of further exploration in order to address issues relating to transport and distance.
- The Kinlochbervie and Helmsdale locality plans both noted that technology brings more and more services to people and initiatives to improve digital connectivity are needed in some areas to enable this.

Regarding **car sharing schemes**:

- In Sutherland, the communities of Creich, Golspie, Assynt, Durness and Scourie expressed an interest in car share schemes to help address some of their transport challenges.
- In Mid Ross, it was felt by some that community car share schemes should be encouraged and better promoted.

Various communities have highlighted concerns, each generally specific in nature to a local area, regarding **accessibility issues**. These include:

- In Rogart, the location of bus stops, with many people stating it is a long walk from the village – which is not ideal for elderly folk.
- In Mid Ross, the community survey found that local transport priorities included providing safe walking / cycling routes to bus stops (e.g. pavements, cycle paths, crossings over main roads) and safe areas to wait at stops (e.g. shelters, well lit, protected from fast traffic)
- In Wick, accessibility issues for people with reduced mobility on buses to Inverness was a big concern.
- In Rural Caithness, the community survey highlighted that the X99 to Inverness has insufficient seating for those with prams or (hidden) disabilities.

A number of the published documents highlighted the **need for better co-ordination of transport and engagement with transport providers**:

- The Sutherland Wide report found that this was a general issue across many of the areas in Sutherland.

- The Nairn and Nairnshire Locality Plan advised that the Local Community Partnership will have *“continued liaison with Public Transport providers for consideration of providing accessible transport on necessary routes within our communities.”*

The **need for improved travel infrastructure** was highlighted by some communities:

- In Mid Ross, suggestions raised through the community survey included allocating car/ bike parking at bus stops, and introducing a park & ride shuttle option for Inverness (e.g. at Tore Roundabout, North Kessock, ICT Football Stadium)
- The Wick community survey highlighted the need for repairs to pavements, roads and parking areas.
- Nairn and Nairnshire Locality Plan noted improvements to cycle/walking routes as a priority issue.
- Fort William Locality Plan highlighted community concerns around a lack of seating around bus shelters and the issue of road traffic congestion in the town.

Discussion

The bottom-up evidence from our communities outlined above illustrates that there are a number of public transport issues which are common in nature across different communities within the Highland CPP.

A particularly common theme, evident in a number of the community surveys and community/ locality plans, relates to insufficient frequency and availability of public transport, and that this can be barrier to accessing employment/ education, services (including health) and social/ leisure opportunities. Overall, this appears to be an issue that is especially pertinent to rural communities.

This is in line with the known reduction of subsidised bus routes in many communities in recent years. It is also in line with the wider literature and available data. The Scottish Household Survey¹ shows that bus service kilometres in the Highlands and Islands fell by 11% in the five years to 2015/16, while in 2018 satisfaction with public transport was markedly lower in rural areas (46%) compared to urban ones (77%).

The document ‘Initial Case for Change: Highlands and Islands report’ (2020)², produced as part of Transport Scotland’s ongoing Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR2), highlights that across the region “the lack of and limited frequency of public transport, bus services in particular, is a problem particularly in rural areas.” The report also states that “bus services do not operate at desired times such as early enough to make rail connections or late enough in the evenings to allow for activities to be undertaken after school/work or to access shift work.”

The Poverty and Inequality Commission’s ‘Transport and Rural Poverty’ (2019)³ report included a focus on rural transport, finding that rural communities can face huge challenges accessing essential services, employment and education opportunities because of the limited public transport available and the often high cost. Two workshops helped to shape the report – one of which was a session staged by the Poverty Alliance and HUG (Action for Mental Health) in Lairg that was attended by about 40 people from across the Highlands⁴. The report recommended that to address transport challenges

¹ [Scottish Household Survey - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](http://www.gov.scot)

² [initial-appraisal-case-for-change-highlands-and-islands-report.pdf \(transport.gov.scot\)](https://www.transport.gov.scot/publications/initial-appraisal-case-for-change-highlands-and-islands-report.pdf)

³ <https://povertyinequality.scot/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Transport-and-Poverty-in-Scotland-Report-of-the-Poverty-and-Inequality-Commission.pdf>

⁴ [Lairg-transport-event-summary.pdf \(povertyinequality.scot\)](https://povertyinequality.scot/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Lairg-transport-event-summary.pdf)

in remote and rural areas Transport Scotland should consider policies aimed at improving the availability of services at times, and consider regulations around pricing structure to reduce financial pressures and ensure greater equality of pricing across communities in Scotland. A more recent report from June this year has examined the relationship between transport and child poverty⁵. Undertaken by the Poverty Alliance and commissioned by Transport Scotland, it highlights that cost, unavailability and unreliability of public transport is too often exacerbating the hardship families are facing. Proposed policy solutions recommended by the report include discounted or free entitlement for families and young people living on low incomes and more affordable combined tickets.

Other studies on this issue include research from 2019⁶ examining the link between rural poverty and levels of mental wellbeing, which surveyed 933 people and interviewed over 70 people in focus groups and one-to-one around Highlands. The work found that people living in rural poverty have lower mean wellbeing scores than those in non-rural areas. Transport was cited as one of the biggest contributors to poor mental wellbeing. Without access to transport work, social participation, local democracy and health services are all more difficult to access and many said this has a huge impact on their levels of mental wellbeing.

Added to the transport needs of residents and communities, the challenges of providing public transport for visitors/ tourists is also especially pertinent in Highland. The Cairngorm National Park, for example, has 18,000 residents but hosts around two million visitors in a typical year. Improving the linkages and aligning funding support between resident and visitor focused transport in Highland could help solve challenges associated with both simultaneously⁷. It was highlighted in TS's 'Initial Case for Change: Highlands and Islands' report that there are opportunities to increase the number of tourists using more sustainable modes, including bus, rail and active travel. The report noted that "this unmet demand for public transport amongst tourists could contribute to higher public transport usage, potentially improving the commercial viability/value for money of any public transport improvements to address transport problems in the area."

The evidence outlined in this report largely pre-dates the Covid 19 pandemic. However, it is reasonable to anticipate that problems of insufficient public transport services will be heightened by the pandemic, with reduced patronage having potential implications for the viability of already fragile rural bus services – not just amid ongoing degrees of travel restrictions, but possibly also in the long term due to a lasting shift in home working amongst much of the working population.

'Reducing inequalities' is one of the National Transport Strategy's four overarching priorities and the Strategy emphasises that transport plays a key role in enabling people to realise their human rights, "such as the right to education, the right to work, the right to take part in cultural and public life, the right to an adequate standard of living and the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health."⁸ Reversing the decline in rural bus services will be vital in delivering on this priority for Highland and many other parts of the country.

'The Scottish Government and Scottish Green Party - Shared Policy Programme', published September 2021, includes a commitment to introducing a Community Bus Fund, which will support local transport authorities to improve local public transport in their areas. Details on the new fund are still to be

⁵ <https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Transport-and-Child-Poverty-Beyond-the-Pandemic.pdf>

⁶ Lyons, S. (2019), 'The links between rural poverty and levels of mental wellbeing', (unpublished dissertation)

⁷ Visit Scotland (2019), 'Exploring Sustainable Mobility for Sustainable Tourism' [PowerPoint Presentation \(visitscotland.org\)](#)

⁸ [national-transport-strategy.pdf](#)

announced however the Shared Policy Programme document states that it “will support transport authorities to explore the full range of options set out in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, including municipal bus services”.

Recommendations for Highland CPP

The HOIP Infrastructure Group recommends that the issue of rural bus services should be considered as an immediate priority transport issue on which the Highland CPP and its Local Community Partnerships should have a collective voice. It is proposed that the Highland CPP advocates at a national level on the need for measures to reverse the decline in rural buses, support the economic recovery in rural parts of Highland.

This should include advocating on issues around funding for rural bus services. Also, advocating for the role of Community Transport and DRT. As discussed above, both of these forms of provision have been highlighted by a number of communities as potential solutions that can help address transport challenges in rural areas.

It is recommended that the Highland CPP endorses existing advocacy efforts on these issues. Specifically, supporting proposals which have been developed by HITRANS in their recent report Rural Bus Service Support and Funding Case for Change⁹. The recommendations in the HITRANS report aim to allow Scotland’s Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs), Local Authorities and Community Transport groups to work together to deliver a pipeline approach that would make a real and lasting difference for sustainable travel in rural areas. The report includes the following proposals that should be supported by central government:

- Introduce a Rural Transport Fund.
- Introduce RTP capital passenger transport grant to support improvements to infrastructure and public transport capital assets including within the community transport sector.
- Introduce an Enhanced DRT funding stream.
- Recognition that the national concessionary fare scheme has an in-built unfairness for rural areas that should be addressed and consider utilising the Bus Service Operator Grant as a mechanism to deliver equity for rural bus services.
- Work with bus manufacturers to develop an affordable multi-purpose accessible bus design that is fit for purpose for rural bus service.
- Investigating the potential for more regional collaboration on Public Transport and DRT management and operations

The Highland CPP’s endorsement and additional advocacy for these proposed measures should be taken forward through a letter to the relevant minister(s) and Transport Scotland officials. This correspondence will seek to emphasise the case for these measures, and will include a summary of the evidence from our communities, outlined in this report, which further demonstrates the need for additional support for rural buses in the Highland context.

⁹ https://hitrans.org.uk/Documents/Rural_Bus_Service_Support_and_Funding_Case_for_Change.pdf