



Northumberland County Council

Health and Well-being Board

Thursday, 14 March 2024

Transport health needs assessment

Report of Councillor(s) Cllr Veronica Jones, Cabinet Member for Improving Public Health and Wellbeing

Responsible Officer(s): Gill O'Neill, Executive Director for Public Health (DPH), Inequalities & Stronger Communities

1. Link to Key Priorities of the Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the following priorities in the NCC Corporate Plan 2023-26:

Achieving value for money: improving public and community transport networks helps improve our residents' physical and mental health and access to education and employment. This should reduce demand on services and encourage economic contribution. It will also encourage use of current transport networks, ensuring that services which NCC is already funding are utilised to greater capacity to ensure better return on investment.

Tackling inequalities: access to private transport is closely linked to socio-economic status and other domains of inequality. Ensuring robust, accessible, and affordable public and community transport networks reduces the impact of these inequalities and aids individual independence and resilience. Partnerships with the VCSFE sector also increase community capacity and resilience.

Driving Economic Growth: improved transport networks increase residents' ability to access education and employment opportunities, so that they are more able to contribute economically.

2. Purpose of report

This report aims to identify what is currently provided in terms of public and community transport across Northumberland, what is needed by the people of Northumberland and where the gaps are.

3. Recommendations

Recommendation for the HWBB is to receive and endorse the recommendations detailed in Chapter 7 of the full report and to embed these into the Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy. These recommendations are copied below. Details of allocations, priority and timescales of each recommendation can be found in Chapter 7.

Recommendations to prioritise transport as a key factor in sustaining good health

1. Work with healthcare partners to identify and address transport factors in missed appointments. This includes:
 - Ensuring current offers for transport support are communicated to the relevant audience, through media such as the Gateway app or reimbursement of travel expenses scheme. Embed this communication into current MECC initiatives.
 - Identifying gaps in the transport offer and assess commissioning and funding arrangements more collaboratively between the VCSFE, Local authority, secondary and primary care
 - Address overall demand to travel by promoting the use of the patient portal to allow eligible patients to access tele-medicine where appropriate.

2. Recognise the interconnected nature of transport and work. This includes:
 - Work with commissioners and providers of employment support services to prioritise addressing transport as a barrier to long-term employment.
 - Work with employers to consider the impact of transport barriers on recruitment difficulty and identify measures to overcome these barriers e.g. concessionary passes, specific employee transport, place-based approaches to sharing transport resource, car sharing schemes, cycle to work schemes

3. Include priorities identified into Joint Health and Wellbeing strategy.

4. Maximise devolved powers and funding in emerging North East Mayoral Combined Authority to support its aims of better integration and better connectivity to reduce inequalities. This includes presenting findings of this report to the Integrated Care System (ICS) Executive board.

Recommendations to ensure sustainability of public transport network

5. Undertake an in-depth data analysis of public transport network to highlight future areas of need.
6. Highlight rural transport needs within regional work e.g. North East Transport Plan refresh
7. Lobby for continuation of schemes such as the £2 cap fare.
8. Invest in digital platforms for public transport which can feed information into the new connected information system proposed within the North East Bus Service Improvement Plan.

Recommendations to ensure sustainability of community transport network

9. Create opportunities for longer term funding which focusses on evaluating and continuing what works within existing community transport schemes, alongside prioritising innovation in funding bids.
10. Collaboration between LA and VCSFE partners as well as between VCSFE partners across the patch to encourage stronger relationships within and between communities. This includes prioritising social value in procurement bids to the Local Authority to build stronger relationships between organisations and communities.

Recommendations to support those at highest risk of transport-related exclusion

11. Take a place-based approach to community transport which provides CT that meets the need of those communities and allows scaling up of CT provision.
12. Increase awareness of concessionary passes / transport support via welfare benefits
13. Ensuring accessibility 'quick wins', such as:
 - Increased bus driver training for carrying passengers with extra needs.
 - Ensuring audio announcements on all bus services are functional and turned on.
 - Providing clear timetables at bus stops and in railway stations in an accessible size and type font. Also providing better access to accessible information online and in physical spaces.

14. Forward plan date and reason for urgency if applicable

Not applicable

15. Background

Good public and community transport networks are vital in keeping people physically and mentally healthy, in work and socially connected. Transport networks affect our health directly through noise and air pollution, and indirectly by influencing how active we are during the day. They are vital in allowing us to attend healthcare services, to find and keep a job and to see our friends and family.

The way in which we travel has changed significantly over the last 70 years. Northumberland has (like the rest of the UK) seen an increase in reliance on cars and decrease in the use of existing public transport (PT) networks. In a county which contains many rural and farming communities a certain level of car usage will always be inevitable. However, the lack of alternatives to a car are resulting in households either in 'forced' car ownership (where they buy or maintain a car despite financial struggles) or, if they cannot afford a car at all, being unable to fully meet their needs.

There has been a renewed national, regional and local focus on the importance of public and community transport networks, including a recent announcement by national government which promised a £19.8 billion investment into transport as part of the Network North plan. However, the focus of such investments on urban spaces such as cities and towns risks neglecting the needs of rural counties like Northumberland. This health needs assessment (HNA) aims to advocate for these needs, by identifying what is currently provided in terms of public and community transport across Northumberland, what is needed by the people of Northumberland and where the gaps are.

16. Reasons for the recommendations

Need has been identified by analysing existing literature, quantitative data collected by government bodies and service providers, and communities' own expressions of need via focus groups. Bringing these data sets together has given us the following key insights:

- ***Transport plays a significant role in how people access healthcare.***

While local healthcare services such as General Practices and pharmacies tend to be more easily accessible, infrequency of services or poor connections mean people can be travelling for hours for even brief appointments. These issues were even worse for hospital appointments in centres such as Newcastle, Hexham and Ashington.

Many community transport (CT) providers offer an element of patient transport, but these services are increasingly under strain as demand for them increases within the community and the NHS. Many CT providers also have eligibility criteria that mean certain demographics are unable to use them.

People with disabilities and those providing unpaid care are more likely to require regular access to healthcare services. Our most rural areas are still seeing a high proportion of residents who identify as having a disability and being limited a lot. These people are more likely to need PT and CT networks and yet less likely to live in areas with a frequent, reliable service.

- ***Transport significantly impacts how likely people are to find, get and keep a job.***

In the UK someone with access to a car is almost four times more likely to be employed than someone relying on PT alone. Employers in Northumberland also cite transport as a key factor in their difficulties to recruit, particularly in more rural areas. Employability schemes can only support travel costs short-term and other means of support such as means-tested welfare benefits do not take the extra costs of travelling from a rural area into account. This makes it difficult for applicants outside of urban areas to attend job interviews or to maintain work.

A lack of evening services impacts people's ability to undertake shift work which falls outside of the standard '9 to 5' pattern. This particularly impacts the two largest employment sectors in Northumberland which are the health sector and accommodation and food services.

- ***The financial impact of travel is felt differently across Northumberland and forms a key challenge in maintaining and growing current networks.***

Many residents in Northumberland are subject to the 'rural premium', i.e. the inherently increased costs of living rurally. Prices for bus and coach travel have risen fastest among all modes of transport and now fall well above inflation.

Financial factors also contribute to the fragility of many community transport services. Rising costs of fuel, buying and maintaining vehicles and other costs such as insurance are placing services under strain. Short-term funding cycles that prize innovation can also make the running of a long-term, stable and sustainable service more difficult.

- ***A lack of transport leads to social isolation.***

A lack of evening services (particularly from central hubs such as Newcastle out to rural areas) impact not only employment but social opportunities too. Young people in particular find it difficult to access social and leisure opportunities as they are unable to get home. We know that social isolation has a significant impact on physical and mental health and is directly linked to people's risk of dying earlier than expected.

- ***Current transport networks risk widening inequalities.***

Differences in transport provision risk widening inequalities between rural and urban residents in terms of access to healthcare, employment and social opportunities. Current public transport systems present certain barriers to passengers with extra needs that make it less likely that they are able to travel independently. These accessibility 'blind spots' need to be addressed to ensure all passengers are best placed to use existing services. This includes the provision of up-to-date information in accessible formats (including large font, braille, online and paper copies at bus stops), as well as the option for personal support in the form of ticket offices and PT staff trained in supporting passengers with extra needs.

- **Considering the sustainability of current and future public and community transport networks is key.**

We heard how vital and valued both public and community transport networks are across Northumberland. While many people still rely on public transport networks a drop in patronage and cuts made to local government funding have already resulted in a reduction in services and are placing the wider system under threat. Community transport provides a valuable service but also faces challenges, including fragmentation across the patch and difficulties in securing funding and a consistent volunteer base.

Moving forward we need both public and community transport networks to be robust as they meet different needs in the community. We will always need public transport to support our working age and commuting populations, as well as allowing elderly residents or residents with extra needs to retain their independence for as long as possible. Community transport will always be necessary for passengers who need the kind of door-to-door support that public transport cannot provide, as well as communities (such as in the most rural areas) for whom a bespoke service makes the most sense in terms of efficiency and cost.

17. Implications

Policy	Proposed priorities and actions support the priorities of the Northumberland Inequalities Plan, the Northumberland Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy and the Council’s Corporate Plan. Recommendations seek to align other organisational strategies and plans.
Finance and value for money	There are no direct financial implications associated with this report. It is not anticipated that additional funding will be required to implement the report recommendations. Existing funding will be utilised where possible and opportunities to maximise external funding opportunities will be pursued.
Legal	None
Procurement	No existing requirements for procurement, though some recommendations may require organisations to consider procurement implications.
Human resources	None
Property	None
The Equalities Act: is a full impact assessment required and attached?	A full impact assessment has not been undertaken for this report Ensuring robust, accessible and affordable public and community transport networks will help to reduce inequalities.

Risk assessment	None
Crime and disorder	None
Customer considerations	Positive impact for residents' use of public and community transport services.
Carbon reduction	Positive impact as a result of modal shift away from private vehicle use.
Health and wellbeing	Improved health for all residents and reduced health inequalities via better access to healthcare services, employment and social opportunities.
Wards	All wards

18. Background papers

Not applicable

19. Links to other key reports already published

[Northumberland Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2018-2028](#)

[Northumberland Local Plan 2016-2036](#)

[The Northumberland Inequalities Plan \(2022 – 2032\)](#)

20. Author and Contact Details

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