



Northumberland County Council

Cabinet

Tuesday, 7 May 2024

Public and Community Transport Health Needs Assessment

Report of Councillor(s) Cllr Veronica Jones, Cabinet Member for Tackling Inequalities

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

Recommendations for Cabinet are:

1. To endorse the action plan detailed in the attached appendix document of the full report
2. To lobby nationally for a continuation of the £2 cap fare to keep transport affordable for all residents
3. To present a call to action to the newly formed North East Combined Authority (NECA) highlighting key issues around transport in rural areas

4. **Forward plan date and reason for urgency if applicable**

Not applicable

5. **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.

6. 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 employment.

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.

7. 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	A full impact assessment has not been undertaken for this report.

assessment required and attached?	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);

8. Background papers

Not applicable

9. Links to other key reports already published

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

[Northumberland Local Plan 2016-2036](#)

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

10. Author and Contact Details

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