

Delegated decision

February 2021

**Durham County Council response to
Department of Transport (DfT)
consultation on Future of Transport:
Rural Strategy**



Ordinary Decision

Report of Corporate Management Team

Amy Harhoff, Corporate Director of Regeneration, Economy and Growth

**Councillor Carl Marshall, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Economic
Regeneration**

Electoral division(s) affected:

County Wide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To seek agreement to the content of the Council's response (Appendix 2) to the Department of Transport's (DfT) consultation on 'Future of Transport: Rural Strategy'.

Executive summary

- 2 The current consultation is a call for evidence on issues facing rural areas that could be addressed by transport solutions, as well as covering potential innovative solutions to these issues, and proposing a set of principles that may be incorporated into a future Rural Strategy. The consultation forms part of the 'Future of transport regulatory review'.
- 3 The Council's response is broadly supportive of a Rural Strategy to help address specific transport issues faced by rural areas, whilst acknowledging that many potential solutions would require an increase in funding and investment to be successful. Many rural areas are already suffering from transport poverty, so investment is required in transport and connectivity in our rural areas, so that Covid recovery and the national levelling up agenda is inclusive of our rural communities. The Council's response is attached at Appendix 2.

- 4 The response has been prepared by the Spatial Policy and Transport Services teams and Members have also been consulted on the draft comments. We have also shared our draft with Northumberland County Council, who have similar rural issues to County Durham, to ensure our comments are aligned.

Recommendations

- 5 The Director of Regeneration, Economy and Growth is recommended to agree:
 - a) the Council's response to the Department of Transport (DfT) consultation on 'Future of Transport: Rural Strategy' included at Appendix 2.

Background to Consultation

- 6 The government wants everyone in the UK to be able to benefit from a world leading transport network, with data led innovation at the forefront of this ambition. The government has also promised to level disadvantaged regions and put in infrastructure that will lift every region as we recover from Covid and transition to a post Brexit economy.
- 7 Last July, the Council responded to the government's Future of Transport Regulatory Review, following the publication of the Future of Mobility: Urban Strategy in March 2019. This consultation will inform a complementary Future of Transport: Rural Strategy, to shape transport in rural areas and to improve access to work, education and services in rural areas.
- 8 This consultation is about the issues faced by rural areas, existing innovative transport solutions in rural areas and general principles that could inform a Rural Strategy.

Summary of Council Response to Consultation

Issues Facing Rural Areas

- 9 The first section of the Council's response is outlining some of the key rural issues in County Durham. Durham's rural areas vary widely in character from remote and sparsely populated areas in the Pennine Dales, to the larger villages located within the former coalfield communities in the centre and east of the County. Ninety percent of the county's population lives east of the A68 in forty percent of the county area, yet rural communities do not only exist within the west of the county. Area wise, 89% of Durham is classified as either rural or rural town and fringe - with over 200,000 people living in rural areas.
- 10 Three quarters of people in rural Durham have access to a car, leaving 25% who depend on public transport, walking, or cycling to get around. In Durham's urban areas, almost 30% of people do not have access to a car, demonstrating that cars are more of a necessity to rural residents and often residents are forced into car ownership, despite the high costs. The Council's response confirms that car dependency is an issue facing our rural areas.
- 11 Regarding rural access to key services, including healthcare and education, the Council's response notes that this can be an issue in rural areas, especially for people who do not have access to a car. This is particularly true for younger people accessing post-16 education, and older people accessing specialist healthcare services. Our response highlights the impact of funding cuts on the county's bus services, noting that a good core service has been maintained but that evening and Sunday travel is more challenging by bus.
- 12 Access to employment and training is also more challenging for people in rural areas, especially for people who do not have access to a car. Additionally, social isolation can be a problem in rural areas, especially for older people who no longer feel confident driving. Good broadband can

mitigate some but not all of these issues. The Council's response supports greater investment in broadband and transport infrastructure for rural areas to address this issue.

- 13 The Council's response is underpinned by the challenges of 'transport poverty' in rural areas. The Government has been clear that its mission is to level up our regions, boost economic growth and ensure we all benefit from the opportunities Brexit brings. The government has also promised that public investment is set to reach levels not sustained for 40 years. Our response argues that it is essential that that investment is targeted to provide better transport and inclusive growth in rural areas.
- 14 Our response also highlights some of the broader issues facing rural areas that should be considered in a future Rural Strategy including the potential for Brexit to impact on the rural economy, the different age demographics of rural areas compared to urban areas and the potential long term impact of the coronavirus pandemic on working and travel patterns.

Developments in Innovation for Rural Transport

- 15 In the second section of our response, we set out the Council's views on transport 'trends' in rural areas. The Council's response refers to Shildon's borrow-a-bike scheme as an example of a type of scheme that could work at increasing use of active travel modes in a rural areas. The response also suggests that digital mapping could play a much larger role in identifying routes to people and guide them on their journeys.
- 16 Micromobility also has potential to benefit rural areas. E-bikes could enable people to cycle much greater distances, and e-scooters could provide a more affordable mode of transport to younger people who do not have access to a car. Journeys could be better integrated through the implementation of 'Mobility as a Service' (MaaS) which allows people to plan journeys across multiple modes more intuitively and without needing to purchase multiple tickets. However, implementation of MaaS in rural areas is likely to incur greater costs than a comparable scheme in an urban area. Offering this service on a regional level could help to offset the cost and improve people's access to transport in rural areas. Car clubs could also help reduce the financial burden on rural residents by removing the need to own and maintain a private car.
- 17 The consultation suggests that digital models such as Demand Responsive Transport (DRT), which allows users to hail a bus and be picked up within a specific window of time (usually 15-20 minutes), might be used to allow for more flexible services especially if used to complement the existing core bus network. The Council's view is that flexible modes like DRT are generally not viable in rural areas without significant subsidy due to the greater distance of journeys and low population density. It is also essential for the government and local authorities to help maintain the core bus routes and services that are a vital lifeline to many of our rural communities.

- 18 Greater use of data could enable people in rural areas to better plan their journeys, by giving real time data about when buses are due. In combination with other schemes such as car clubs or e-bike rental, better data could give people confidence about the availability of the service they want to use.
- 19 The Council's response also covers the possibility of new modes such as drones being used for deliveries, as well as the strength and identity of rural communities.

Encouraging transport innovation in rural areas

- 20 The third and final section of the consultation outlines a number of general principles that the government may include in a Rural Strategy and asks for the Council's views. The Council's response gives support to the principles that the benefits of innovation in mobility must be available to all parts of the UK and all segments of society, that new mobility services must lead the transition to zero emissions, and that walking, cycling and active travel must remain the best options for short rural journeys.
- 21 Of primary importance, is the principal that rural areas should at least have the same opportunities for ring fenced funding that is currently afforded to urban areas. The forthcoming UK shared prosperity and levelling up funding pots provide an opportunity to invest in our rural areas and this is our ask of central government.
- 22 The Council's response does not however, give support to the principle that mass transit must remain fundamental to an efficient transport system, as this is often not feasible in rural areas, and would risk leaving 'deep' rural areas behind if made a basic principle of a Rural Strategy. The response is also cautious about the principle that mobility innovation must help to reduce congestion through more efficient use of limited road space, as congestion is generally not an issue for rural areas themselves, but may be an issue to for rural residents when they are travelling into more urban areas.

Conclusion

- 23 This report has provided an overview of the Department of Transport's (DfT) consultation on 'Future of Transport: Rural Strategy', and the summary of the key points as contained within the Council's full response which is set out in detail in Appendix 2.

Next Steps

- 24 It is proposed to submit the Council's response to the consultation before the consultation deadline on February 16, 2021.

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	Peter Ollivere	Tel: 03000 263610

Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

As this is a consultation there are no legal implications at this stage.

Finance

As this is a consultation there are no financial implications at this stage.

Consultation

This a Department for Transport (DfT) consultation to which the council is responding. Consultation has been undertaken with Members and a copy of our response has been shared with Northumberland County Council.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

As this is a consultation there are no equality implications at this stage. There may be impacts on older and younger people if a Rural Strategy is taken forward.

Human Rights

None.

Crime and Disorder

None.

Staffing

None.

Accommodation

None.

Risk

The consultation will only have indirect policy consequences on bus services.

Procurement

None.

Climate Change

As this is a consultation there are no climate change implications at this stage. There may be impacts on climate change if a Rural Strategy is taken forward.

Appendix 2: Durham County Council Response

Future of Transport: Rural Strategy – DCC response to Consultation

Future of Transport: Rural Strategy – Call for Evidence¹

Durham County Council Response

Q1. Contact details

Peter Ollivere, Durham County Council, peter.ollivere@durham.gov.uk

Q2. Are you responding as an individual or organisation?

Organisation

Section 1 - Issues facing rural areas

Q3 (a) What are your views on dependence on the private car?

Durham County Council is a rural county. We are a unique county in many ways as we have a large population (over 526,000) but unlike most other local authorities with large populations, Durham's population is spread across a large rural area - the county is the 7th largest local authority area in England.

Durham's rural areas vary widely in character from remote and sparsely populated areas in the Pennine Dales, to the larger villages located within the former coalfield communities in the centre and east of the County. Ninety percent of the county's population lives east of the A68 in forty percent of the county area, yet rural communities do not only exist within the west of the county. Area wise, 89% of Durham is classified as either rural or rural town and fringe - with over 200,000 people living in rural areas.

By definition, rural areas do not have good access to urban areas and the services, facilities and employment in urban areas. However, there will be different transport solutions for improving accessibility depending on the type of rural areas. What works in one type of rural area, will not work in a different type of rural area.

The strategy should define what is meant by rural and acknowledge that solutions which may work for one type of rural settlement will not work across the board. Different types of rural area should be considered.

The settlement pattern of towns in the County and 229 villages leads to some dispersed travel patterns that are not feasible by public transport. 71% of journeys to work in the County in 2011 were by single occupancy private car. A report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that rural areas experience a far greater reliance on the car than urban areas, and largely due to reliance on cars need to spend up to 20% more on everyday requirements

¹ Weblink to Government consultation : <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/future-of-transport-rural-strategy-call-for-evidence>

than people living in urban areas, with the cost of living increasing in proportion to how populated a settlement is: residents of hamlets spend the most.²

The 2011 census shows that 25% of people in rural County Durham do not have access to a car, compared to 29% of people in the County's urban areas.³ Again, the more rural a settlement, the greater the dependence on cars: over a quarter of people in Durham's rural towns do not have access to a car, compared to just 12% in rural hamlets. This demonstrates the extent to which people in rural areas depend on cars to get around. For the minority who do not have access to a car, this can cause problems in accessing work, especially for those in our 'deep rural' areas where it is difficult to achieve a viable bus service.

For these reasons, the Council is increasingly working to support more sustainable car use, in recognition of the fact that many people in rural areas do depend on cars to get around. The Council has successfully bid for funding from a number of sources to support delivery of chargepoints in the county. Most notably the Scaling on Street Charging Infrastructure project (SOSCI) is providing 100 chargepoints to areas where a private sector chargepoint may not be viable, including rural areas.

Many rural areas are already suffering from transport poverty so fair investment is required to ensure that the Covid recovery is inclusive of rural areas ensuring that the national levelling up agenda does not omit our rural communities. Notwithstanding the need the fact that electric vehicles provides opportunities to make private cars low carbon, there is another couple of key points that still need to be factored into this for Durham residents in rural areas.

Firstly, over a quarter (27%) of households within the Council area do not have access to a car. More consideration should be given as to how best to support people who do not have access to a vehicle, particularly younger and older people who potentially cannot afford a license or no longer feel comfortable driving.

Fair funding for buses and other public transport is part of the solution here for rural areas. Figures from the Cross-County Network (which represents 36 county and unitary councils in England) APPG report⁴ has shown that funding for bus services for those areas has almost halved by £89.8m since 2010 – a 46% drop. In contrast, city regions' drop in funding is £29.2m over the same period, representing a 19% drop. This is both government funding and council subsidises, with local authorities having little choice but to scale back their level of support due to huge funding challenges they have faced since 2010. The levelling up of funding for public transport in rural areas would be good starting point for any rural bus strategy.

Secondly, the affordability of car ownership or transport in general is pertinent issue. This is sometimes described as transport poverty. Even in affluent rural areas, people can be on low incomes and a larger proportion of their wages are spent on transport when compared with someone living in urban areas, as demonstrated by the Joseph Rowntree report, so car dependence takes a significant proportion of wages. Electric vehicles offer reduced fuel costs but the owner of an EV car still has high upfront costs. Another way to make private car travel more affordable in rural areas, is to promote the use of EV car clubs where

² Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2010), *A minimum income standard for rural households*. Available here:

<https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/minimum-income-standard-rural-households>

³ Dataset KS404EW – Car or van availability

⁴ <https://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/advocacy/publications-and-research/>

residents in rural areas only need to provide the cost of fuel and a small membership fee to cover car maintenance. This would require some funding and expertise to set up a booking system and to manage over time and so will not be a suitable solution in every community.

Q3 (b) What are your views on rural access to key services?

Over a quarter (27%) of households within the Council area do not have access to a car. For those in county and particularly rural areas who do not have ready access to a car, getting to medical appointments, shopping, attending college, finding employment or going to the cinema is only possible with access to public transport, most typically bus services.

In recent years, bus services have declined as commercial operators have withdrawn their services and councils have had to make difficult choices about which services to prioritise given an increasingly tight financial situation. The Council has been able to maintain a good basic service, however this is best for travel towards urban settlements such as Durham City; users wishing to travel from one rural town or village to another may need to take more than one service and spend a much greater amount of time travelling compared to someone making the same journey by car. This relative lack of convenience also entrenches car dependency. People who do not have a car therefore often have to spend much longer travelling to access the same services than a car user would, or in some cases may not be able to make their journey at all due to lack of public transport service at evenings and on Sundays. This is particularly the case in our 'deep' rural areas in the West of the County.

This decline has been exacerbated in the past six months by Covid-19 as lockdowns and now changing work patterns have further threatened the viability of the rural bus services that before Covid-19 were well used and highly valued.

The Council does offer specific help with transport to health appointments in partnership with North East Ambulance Service. We have a variety of services but they do not always have capacity all times of the day or full coverage across the County. The Council also offers a Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) service called Link2. Link2 can currently be used for work, education, health care and shopping journeys, as long as the journey is within the 5 mile limit. This limit ensures the service is available for as many people as possible to access essential services near to where they live. For journeys over 5 miles, Link2 can be used to access the nearest transport hub for onward travel, although this may not be practicable for everyone. The service is not financially viable and so is heavily subsidised by the Council to keep it running. Scaling up the DRT offer in Durham is an option, but funding would need to be significantly increased to support this.

More details on these travel options for patients who need to access health appointment and the Link2 service are set out on the web page below.

<https://www.durham.gov.uk/article/1989/Hospital-transport-services>

The key issue with regard to access to education is post 16 education. In County Durham primary and secondary school pupils are provided with free transport to school if they live three miles or more from their school, but whilst further education is critical for our young people, unfortunately our further education facilities are simply not accessible for many in rural areas due to a lack of transport. For example, arriving at a further educational college from Weardale would take around two hours if that journey was taken by public transport as buses travel from village to village, potentially resulting in an unpractical four hour journey a

day. This is a significant problem in our dales and 'deep' rural communities and still an issue in some of better-connected ex-coalfield villages in the east of our County.

To avoid these long journeys, many families, depend on having a car, with parents often providing lifts to their older children. This is an example of how poor access to services has a knock-on impact on the quality of life for the entire family.

Q3 (c) What are your views access to employment in rural areas?

The variety of employment opportunities, the availability of people with the right skills, and access to training can be lower in rural areas (UK Commission for Employment and Skills). As mentioned above, residents in rural areas have higher transport costs and have to spend a higher proportion of their wages accessing employment opportunities.

For people who do not have access to a car, employment opportunities can be particularly limited. In rural Durham, we know that 25% of households do not have a car. We also know that around 80% of the County's residents are unable to work later or weekend shifts due to lack of bus provision.

There is also a need for better broadband connectivity. Lower levels of infrastructure such as low broadband speeds and variable mobile coverage can be a barrier for rural businesses and limit the growth in rural productivity. This has even greater potential to be an issue currently as lockdown means many people are working or studying from home, so good internet access is crucial. More generally, there is an opportunity to learn from the rollout of broadband infrastructure in offering new transport innovation and funding: rural areas should not be left until last as this contributes towards disadvantaging rural communities. Any Rural Strategy should acknowledge that rural areas will likely need different solutions to urban areas, but that they are equally if not more in need of support in accessing quality transport, as well as employment, education, and other services.

The Council would like to support sustained broadband and transport investment in rural areas to allow the creation of more jobs and business growth in rural areas.

Q3 (d) What are your views on social isolation in Rural Areas

Again, social isolation can be increased by a lack of transport opportunities. This is particularly an issue for people without access to a car, younger people, older people, and people on lower incomes who are unable to afford to use public transport regularly. There are proportionately more elderly people and fewer younger people in rural populations compared with urban ones. The population in rural areas has a higher proportion of older people compared with urban areas: the 2011 census shows that 20% of urban residents were 65 or older compared to 22% of rural residents.

Although relevant to all age cohorts, social isolation is probably mostly pertinent to older people. Even older people who have access to cars, often get to the point where they drive less regularly and feel nervous about driving into main towns or to travel by car in challenging weather conditions. This lack of transport confidence can lead to loss of independence, deteriorating mental health and a decline in well-being.

Broadband connectivity reduces some of the constraints in remote areas with regard to isolation, particularly for young people, but this is less true for older population, who are less technologically literate. Broadband enables residents to access services, work from home,

access education and provides more opportunities for social interaction. However, it cannot replace in person interaction, therefore good quality broadband infrastructure should work alongside rather than instead of good transport links.

Q4 Do you think there are other issues facing rural areas that we should consider in the strategy?

Yes – see Q5 below for additional issues.

Q5 - What issues?

Impact of Brexit on rural communities

The Government has been clear that its mission is to level up our regions, boost economic growth and ensure we all benefit from the opportunities Brexit brings. However, there are concerns regarding the impacts of Brexit on the rural economy. This could potentially have a net negative impact on the rural economy and create more transport poverty in rural areas. To avoid this, the government will have to deliver on a promise that public investment is set to reach levels not sustained for 40 years, this is particularly true of our rural areas.

A report by Northumberland County Council⁵ highlighted that Brexit may have different impacts, both positive and negative, on different sectors in the Rural North, for example:

- Agriculture - the main concern is around the future of policy following the exit from the Common Agricultural Policy;
- Manufacturing - reduced access to EU markets will reduce employment opportunities for rural populations;
- Forestry – the sector sees a number of opportunities in Brexit. With any decline in agriculture and land values, opportunities arise to convert land to forestry;
- Tourism – the sector presented more of a mixed picture with changes to travel and visa processes possibly adding to demand for staycations; and
- Digital and Creative - the sector is often hidden within the wider rural economy but plays a significant and growing role. Much of the success of this sector will be driven by faster broadband and the ability to connect to distant knowledge and networks.

It is vital, that as we leave the European Union, that the UK shared Prosperity Fund targets inclusive growth for areas that suffer from transport poverty or general deprivation. Area wise, 89% of Durham is classified as either rural or rural town and fringe - with over 200,000 people living in rural areas.

Age Demographics

There is a higher proportion of older people in rural areas – 22% of rural residents are 65 or older compared to 20% of urban residents (2011 census). This is particularly important as age can impact on how people travel: many older people eventually stop driving or no longer feel confident driving longer distances or in more difficult conditions, e.g. in the dark or in snow or heavy rain.

⁵ Brexit: Implications for the rural north of England (Nov 2018) <https://a10-vip-wwwprod.ncl.ac.uk/media/wwwnclacuk/centreforruraleconomy/files/researchreports/brexitruralnorth-report.pdf>

Older people are less likely to be technologically literate and so are less likely to benefit from innovations such as Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) if use of an app or online booking system is necessary to access the service. Such services targeted to or intended for use by older people should therefore allow booking over the phone or in person. Additionally, older people are more likely to be impacted by the closure of local branches of banks and other services in favour of using an online service. For older people who cannot confidently use computers, they may have to travel some distance to manage their own affairs.

Access to healthcare services is more likely to be an issue for the elderly: the pandemic has demonstrated that older people are much more likely to have one or more pre-existing health condition. Specialist healthcare services in particular pose an issue, with some people needing to travel for hours to attend outpatient clinics at hospitals in Newcastle or Middlesbrough. It is essential that elderly people in rural areas are able to access the care they need.

Residents of pensionable age are eligible for free bus passes on the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme. The Council is wholly supportive of this as retired people are likely to have less disposable income to spend on transport. However, it should be acknowledged that this can impact on the viability of services if sufficient funding is not offered from elsewhere.

As outlined above, younger people in their teens or early twenties who have not yet passed their driving test or who cannot afford to learn, or to buy their own car, are also more vulnerable to miss out on accessing education, employment, and services. This can potentially contribute to younger people leaving rural areas entirely in search of better opportunities.

The Rural Strategy should therefore give consideration to the specific problems faced by older and younger people in accessing transport in rural areas and should aim to deliver appropriate solutions to each group.

Impact of Covid19 – will there still be more WFH?

The changing patterns of people being required to work from home due to Covid19 has meant that a shift towards home working that (pre pandemic) was happening slowly has now accelerated and the impact of homeworking and reduced commuting is likely, according to most experts, to have long lasting impacts on daily travel patterns. This is particularly relevant for office workers in rural areas who can easily replicate their working environment in their own homes without the additional time and cost expenditure.

The issues and opportunities created by home working in rural areas will need to be addressed in the Rural Strategy.

Section 2 - Developments in innovation for rural transport

Q6. What examples, in rural areas, do you have for the transport trend of:

- **Increasing use of active travel modes**

In the eastern part of our county, the distances between towns and villages and more urban settlements can be relatively small, so with relatively modest investment there is a good opportunity to create the right conditions for people to walk and cycle to employment or educational opportunities. This is particularly relevant as many communities in the east of

the county are located within areas of deprivation where transport poverty is a significant issue and active travel is a cheaper alternative to the private car or public transport.

In the east of the county there is also a good existing transport infrastructure with a network of old railway lines and reasonably quiet roads that can be converted or upgraded to be more suitable for those walking or cycling, to give them space away from fast-moving traffic. More heavily trafficked A roads could also be adapted at a relatively modest price to be safer for those willing to cycle on them.

Transport poverty is a problem for most of the 25% of rural households in County Durham who do not have access to a car, many of whom, will assume that the only reasonable alternative to driving is to get the bus. If a significant proportion of these people could see the monetary and wellbeing value of switching to an active mode of travel for everyday journeys, this could be long-lasting impact that positively benefits a number of key government policy initiatives (reducing carbon emissions, reducing obesity, improving air quality etc.).

In Shildon, the Council offers free three month bike loans to encourage people to commute more sustainably and to improve their health. A trial of the scheme found that 67% regularly used the bike for their commute, with 50% saying they were also cycling recreationally, and 67% saying they had noticed positive health benefits as a result of cycling more. 84% said they planned to purchase their own bike at the end of the three month loan period. This could be scaled up across other areas to support and encourage more people to cycle to work.

Another opportunity to increase people's confidence and enjoyment for active travel is to promote the digitalization of walking and cycling ways. For example, mapping on mobile phone application, can open up active journeys by offering ideas for routes and guiding people as they travel.

Greater uptake of e-bikes could also encourage young and old to travel greater distances as well as helping to improve gender/age balance amongst cyclists and enabling more people with disabilities to cycle around the county.

The Durham Dales in particular are hilly which in itself can be a barrier to cycling for people in rural areas. E-bikes can help with hills as well enabling people to cycle greater distances between settlements.

- **Micro mobility**

E-Cargo bikes can help business with local and last mile deliveries where possible. In 'deeper' rural areas such as the Durham dales 'Teesdale and Weardale' there may be opportunities for business to consider more environmentally friendly ways of delivering. A trial of a delivery service by electric cargo bike in Todmorden, West Yorkshire proved popular.⁶ Similar options could be explored for local and 'last mile' deliveries in rural areas with enough population density to make the scheme viable.

Micro mobility options such as E-scooters, also have potential to address transport challenges faced by younger people if offered at the right price point, providing a more

⁶ <https://www.transportxtra.com/publications/local-transport-today/news/65069/e-cargo-bike-delivery-service-takes-on-covid-19/>

affordable alternative to car use. It also has potential for older people, with e-bikes in particular able to support people to make more challenging and much longer journeys than they could walking or cycling.

- **More effective integration of journeys**

The reliability of transport data is even more important in rural areas, where if you miss a bus service, there may not be another bus coming for at an hour or two. A mobile phone app based on the principals of Mobility-as-a-Service (MaaS) would enable residents to better plan their journeys – an issue which is especially relevant for rural areas, where people might have to take multiple buses or other forms of transport to reach their destination.

Mobility-as-a-Service (MaaS) could benefit rural areas but would likely need to be priced differently to MaaS in urban areas to make it viable in the face of lower population density and greater distances travelled. Alternatively, MaaS offered on a regional basis could charge a flat fee across a region, where the greater cost of rural travel is accounted for.

The possibility of using mobility hubs or e-bike rental at bus stops in town and village centres, to support trip chaining, should be explored.

Car clubs have the potential to reduce the need for individuals to own their own car, with the greatest potential benefits for people making ad hoc journeys – people who need a car to travel to work five days a week will likely still need their own vehicle. This could be a good option for households with two or more adults but only one car, or for younger people who cannot afford their own vehicle. A car club would need some investment upfront to fund a vehicle and booking system, and management thereafter, which makes it a more expensive solution. However, with enough users this could be offset by membership fees.

There is an existing successful car club just over the border with Gateshead in Blackhall Mill. From their experience they have set out a series of points which are essential to developing sustainable rural car clubs:

- An anchor organisation. An organisation embedded within the community who can support and develop the club as a long-term scheme and that can support with back-office functions;
- Funding for start-up costs combined with low overheads to organically grow the club and to reduce cost to members allowing more take up for all;
- Community need, it should be based on an established need in that area, we have developed detailed consultations in the targeted areas;
- A large enough community to enable the club to become financially sustainable, too small and it may not be viable. We know that in urban areas a 5-minute walk is used, we think this metric can be longer. In our community it is most likely to be up to 20 minutes;
- Links to other forms of transport, many car club users utilise the most efficient form of transport for their journey. Good transport links are essential;
- An integral service to the community, like community transport, room hire, social activities, events and classes; and
- It should be viewed in the context of the climate emergency, car dependence and pressure on mobility in rural areas.

Electric vehicles can help to de-carbonise transport in rural areas. Charging infrastructure is critical to support this, particularly as rural journeys are likely to be relatively long compared to urban trips. Due to lower population density in rural areas, charging may need to be priced higher than in urban areas to be viable, supporting the installation and maintenance of the chargepoint as well as paying for the electricity itself.

- **Digital models for more flexible services**

While Durham has a Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) service (see above), it is expensive and not particularly efficient. It is a costly service to run and such services tend to be expensive and not particularly efficient leading to a significant cost per passenger journey.

DRT is often promoted as a public transport solution for rural areas. However, it is unlikely that a flexible service could be more efficient or cost effective than a traditional bus service in a large, rural county like Durham. Here, services generally run in linear directions from our rural areas towards an urban hub – usually Durham City in our county.

The greatest area of opportunity for a flexible service would perhaps be for ‘across the grain’ travel – for example from one smaller settlement to another, without having to travel into the central hub and change as you might on a regular service. Even then, a reasonable volume of passengers would be needed to make running the service worthwhile. Many rural areas are not densely populated enough for this to be viable, unless ran to specific employment/education sites or events.

There may be more potential around digital applications for car clubs and ridesharing which can also improve the consumer experience and benefit employers with large numbers of staff driving to work in business parks or other out-of-town areas.

- **Data and digital improvements unlocking market knowledge**

The widespread use of data could definitely make alternatives to the private car a much more attractive proposition. Effective use of real-time data would enable people in rural areas to better plan their journeys, removing the need to wait at bus stops for extended periods and reducing overall travel time. If solutions such as car clubs or e-bike rental were offered, data could show where the greatest demand is and enable operators to offer more capacity where needed. It would also help give confidence to users that they will know in advance if the service is available. Regarding DRT, data could be used to make DRT journeys as efficient as possible by plotting routes and by making clear when the service is best used.

In all these cases, greater use of technology should take care not to exclude people who are not IT literate.

- **New modes**

The possibility of using drones for delivery has potential in niche areas such as medical deliveries. Deliveries by electric cargo bikes would avoid safeguarding issues posed by drones and would create jobs. Additionally, there is often no data reception in more remote rural areas, which could pose an issue for drone navigation.

There is evidence of new modes being used to address logistics issues in the county: Z-move are an emission logistics company working in the Durham market, using an electric car club to do deliveries on Saturdays. Although this is happening in an urban area the model could translate to a rural area.

- **Rural community identity**

The importance of ultra-fast broadband connectivity is important to changing the composition of rural economies which has seen a shift towards increasing numbers of businesses selling goods and services beyond their local areas. Innovations such as e-cargo bikes can help rural businesses to reach markets more quickly via improved transport connections.

- **Strong community links?**

Many of our rural communities have a history of self-help in terms of the development and implementation of a wide range of projects, initiatives and less formal activities that contribute positively to their communities.

This has not just been down to Durham County Council, and local councils and meetings but also other community organisations. They are best placed to understand their needs at a local level and it is therefore vital that this resource continues to be utilised and sustained. That they remain active, engaged and are well represented is critical.

Through good partnership working there will be opportunities for us to secure more capacity across the rural parts of the county to deliver further improvements for their communities. Initiatives such as E-cargo deliveries, chargepoints for EVs, community buses and car clubs need to tap into these strong rural networks.

Question 7 Do you think there are other trends in innovation we haven't included?

Yes.

Q8 What trends in innovation?

Car clubs – See text in previous section above.

Section 3 - Encouraging transport innovation in rural areas - Our approach

Q9 Do you think the future of transport rural strategy should include that:

- new modes of transport and new mobility services must be safe and secure by design

Yes

- the benefits of innovation in mobility must be available to all parts of the UK and all segments of society

Yes

- walking, cycling and active travel must remain the best options for short urban journeys

Yes

- mass transit must remain fundamental to an efficient transport system

No

- new mobility services must lead the transition to zero emissions

Yes

- mobility innovation must help to reduce congestion through more efficient use of limited road space – for example, through sharing rides, increasing occupancy or consolidating freight

Don't know

- the marketplace for mobility must be open to stimulate innovation and give the best deal to consumers

Yes

- new mobility services must be designed to operate as part of an integrated transport system combining public, private and multiple modes for transport users

Yes

- data from new mobility services must be shared, where appropriate, to improve choice and the operation of the transport system

Yes

Q9b Which additional principles would you like to see in the strategy?

On the principals above, providing mass public transport is unrealistic in rural areas as you need sufficient population density to make this viable - which is not present in rural areas. We would suggest amending the principal 'to regular public transport in all rural areas'.

Mobility and innovation have a role to play in rural areas but is more about reducing carbon emissions than reducing congestion.

An open marketplace must work in partnership with the relevant local authority in rural areas so that new mobility can complement existing subsidised public services.

An additional principal specific for rural areas is that funding should be fair and should at least 'level up' funding for rural areas when compared with transport funding for urban areas. As the 2020 Cross County Network report evidenced, Rural bus services have faced disproportionate funding cuts when compared with routes in urban areas. While Transforming the Cities funding has been welcomed by this authority, the Council would also support a specific funding ringfenced for rural areas.

Encouraging transport innovation in rural areas

Q10 Are there specific considerations for testing and trialing new technologies in rural areas that you think we should consider?

Viability: new technologies should be able to demonstrate, or should be trialed to establish whether or not they would be viable. Solutions that are not viable on their own should not be offered without accompanying long term funding to enable them to be delivered on a long-term basis.

User friendliness: where technology such as apps is used, care should be taken not to exclude people who are not confident with IT, particularly older people.

Q11 - In your view, what should the role be of:

- **Central government**

Central government should set out a clear strategy for improving rural transport. This would set out the importance of transport and connectivity in our rural areas and address the challenges such as transport poverty and social isolation. The Rural Strategy should set key areas of opportunities for new and existing technologies and should include measurable targets for improving transport accessibility in our rural areas. The Strategy should reflect the significant variety of the UK's rural areas.

This Strategy would set the framework for research and development, sub-national, regional and local government policies and give the private sector the surety to invest in the appropriate technology and transport modes. The private sector, universities and local government can then work in partnership and base their own work on the overriding national strategy. The strategy should also align with the Transport Decarbonisation Plan, the Road to Zero Strategy and the UK Industrial Strategy. The Rural Strategy will set the tone for local rural strategies, policies, research and funding bids.

It is vital, that as we leave the European Union, that the UK shared Prosperity Fund targets inclusive growth for areas that suffer from transport poverty or general deprivation. Area wise, 89% of Durham is classified as either rural or rural town and fringe - with over 200,000 people living in rural areas.

The government should ring fence significant funding streams to rural transport so rural areas can prosper in a post Brexit and post Covid19 landscape. While Transforming the Cities funding has been welcomed by this authority, the Council would also support a specific funding ringfenced for rural areas as well as the leveling up funding prioritising rural communities so they are not left behind.

- **Sub-national transport bodies**

Subnational transport bodies, such as TfN, can set priorities for their regions based on its specific needs and challenges by setting regional strategies based on government policy. TfN must be provided with adequate budgets and budget responsibility to enable them to fund significant projects across the North of England to enable delivery of the levelling up agenda.

- **Local authorities**

Local authorities have their own role in implementing policies, drawing up schemes and bidding for funding. They also have a key role in liaising with communities to establish buy-in for proposals, which is required to make new transport schemes more successful in the long run.

Q12 - Do you think government can encourage the private sector to develop innovative new transport services in rural areas? (yes/no question)

Yes.

Q13

Funding streams and policy incentives will encourage the private sector to operate in rural areas.

Q14 - Do you have any other comments on this call for evidence?

n/a