Campaign for Better Transport

Transport deserts

The absence of transport choice in England's small towns

February 2020

CPRE The countryside charity

Contents

The countryside charity

This research was commissioned by CPRE, the countryside charity.

CPRE is the countryside charity that campaigns to promote, enhance and protect the countryside for everyone's benefit, wherever they live. With a local CPRE in every county, we work with communities, businesses and government to find positive and lasting ways to help the countryside thrive - today and for generations to come.

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Introduction

To have good mobility is to be able to move freely and easily. Regardless of background, stage of life or transport requirements, everyone needs good mobility. With good mobility comes the ability to connect with friends and family, to benefit from employment and education, to access shops and services and much more. Without it, opportunities and choices in all these areas become more limited and exclusive.

This research introduces the concept of 'transport deserts'. It defines a transport desert as a town which is inappropriately served by transport in a way that is likely to limit choices and opportunities for the people who live there.

The concept of a transport desert is a relative one. For an individual, anywhere is a transport desert if you lack the means to use what is available. Across the country, the quality and extent of public transport varies considerably. Equally, a relative lack of transport choice will mean something very different in a large city compared with a small village.

There can also be political, economic, geographical or historical reasons for different transport options towns are able to offer. In some cases, towns which lost their railway stations in the Beeching cuts of the 1960s are now losing the bus services that were brought in to replace them. In others, towns have grown in population, but public transport infrastructure has failed to keep pace. Elsewhere, employment and commuting patterns have changed in ways that have not been matched by transport provision.

What these places lack is transport appropriate for their communities. But the objective of the transport deserts research is not simply to show where in the country such weaknesses are most striking. The point of any project identifying disadvantage is to make the case for improving matters. For this reason, the findings of the research extend to policy recommendations detailing measures which should be undertaken to stop the number of transport deserts growing and to reverse the negative impact they are having.

In covering these themes, the aim of this research is both to introduce the idea of transport deserts as they affect England's towns, and to detail public policy changes to tackle them.

Context and rationale

This section provides an overview of why the transport deserts methodology has been developed. It sets out the basic thinking behind the methodology and the negative trends that the emergence and growth of transport deserts are contributing to.

Nearly a quarter of the country's population lives in small towns. Using the definitions developed by the Centre for Towns,[1] small towns and communities with populations of 5,000 to 30,000 are home to a total of 15 million people across Britain.

Despite the numbers of people directly affected, the lot of small towns is arguably a low priority among transport providers and public policy makers.

In transport terms, such areas are not perceived to suffer the privations of service already affecting more rural areas. Nor are they big enough to yet be of great interest to new and emerging transport providers and technologies, or those developing ideas such as Mobility as a Service. For the most part, small towns are not even in a position to take control of their own transport destiny, with the devolutionary thrust of policy delivery in transport focused on large urban centres.

Yet, small towns are in some ways suffering the most from changes in transport. Many have long since lost their railway stations and are rarely able to justify the investment to reconnect them. Over the last decade, this has been compounded by the decline in bus services, particularly those supported by local authorities.

When these changes are well-advanced, a town becomes a transport desert. This denies people choice and opportunity, creates isolation, damages the public realm and fuels a wellhead of unsustainable car dependency.

The negative consequences of transport deserts are clear. They exclude those who do not have access to a car, most often the young, older people, those with disabilities and low-income groups. As young people move away from small towns, the resulting demographic shows fast-ageing populations[2] which, without interventions to maintain liveable communities can lose economic vibrancy and undermine well-being.

Why look at small towns?

The transport deserts research focuses on England's small towns. Distinct settlements with populations of between 5,000 and 30,000 have been selected for a number of reasons. Across Britain, over 15 million people live in places of this size, but unlike larger places the transport needs of towns have not been considered in transport research.

Small towns, often surrounded by rural hinterland, rarely benefit from national policy initiatives like city devolution or the powers held in the Bus Services Act. This is despite evidence that transport choice in such towns is diminishing. This is particularly true of local authority support for buses, which has fallen away sharply in non-metropolitan counties in recent years.

Across Britain

15 million people

live in settlements with populations between 5,000 and 30,000

Across Britain there are

over 1,000 towns

with populations between 5,000 and 30,000[3]

It takes

54% longer

for people in small towns to get to their doctor's surgery by public transport compared with those in large towns[4]

Many small towns are being affected by the long-term decline in bus services and the country's irregularly distributed rail network. Funding for buses has been subject to significant reductions in recent years. Socially important services subsidised by local authorities have been the most severely impacted by these reductions. Ten years ago such buses, which often connect to poorer or isolated areas and communities, represented a third of all bus services. Now, some county councils have removed all funding from supported buses. Campaign for Better Transport research shows these services saw their local authority funding cut by 43 per cent between 2009/10-2018/19 across England, with over 3,000 routes reduced or completely withdrawn since 2009.[5]

Consequences of reduced transport choice

Transport and social exclusion

Social exclusion does not come about solely because of a lack of opportunities but rather a lack of access to those opportunities. Here weak transport provision is a major barrier to participation in rural areas, affecting low income households, older people and those in education and training the most.[6]

Rising costs create no-go areas

In rural areas, the consequences of poor mobility are often compounded by the need to travel longer distances to access shops, employment and services. Those reliant on public transport have seen bus fares rise much faster than the costs of private transport while the number and extent of bus services available has declined in many areas. In many rural areas, the scarcity of essential services is increasing while the public transport options to access them is shrinking.

Transport and carbon

National government has enshrined in legislation a target to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. The domestic transport sector is now the largest source of these emissions.

Access to services

In both towns and adjacent rural areas, reliance on the private car reduces choice and accessibility to important destinations such as schools, hospitals, town centres and other trip generators.

An undermining of the public realm

The setting and appearance of towns can be adversely affected by congestion and pollution. By being car dependent, transport deserts are more likely to suffer such problems than comparable areas with better public transport.

Pressure on high streets

High streets, already under pressure from internet shopping and centralisation of some services, can suffer lower footfall when public transport is reduced. The loss of bus services not only disadvantages those who find them convenient or essential, but contributes to the pressures facing the high street.

Drawing on the problems identified above, this report aims to:

- **Draw attention to the problems associated with transport deserts**
- **Offer a methodology for identifying places which are becoming transport deserts**
- **Suggest policy interventions which can help alleviate negative trends.**

Methodology and scoring

Methodology

A two-stage process has been developed for selecting and assessing towns with the potential to be transport deserts. Outline detail of each is set out below.

Stage 1:
Identifying potential sites

The first stage of the methodology is to identify appropriate towns. Based on the former Government Office boundaries, the research has two areas of study within England – the North East and the South West. Using census statistics, all settlements and small towns of between 5,000 and 30,000 people are selected. Before further research is carried out, those locations which are part of larger built up areas or within close hinterland of large settlements were excluded.

Stage 2:
Comparing public transport provision in each town

A point scoring system has been developed with which to compare the transport performance of settlements and small towns. Points are allocated to settlements based on their bus, rail and other transport offer. More detail on scoring and the evolution of the methodology is set out in Annex 2.

A town of 30,000 people may have little in common with one of 5,000. At the lower end, settlements are likely to be reliant on nearby settlements for some key services such as secondary education, shopping and primary healthcare. At the upper end, settlements are likely to be self-reliant for more of the day-to-day needs of their populous. To allow this distinction to be considered, two sub-categories of settlement size are considered (places of 5,000 to 12,000 people and those of 12,000 to 30,000 people) based on the average population size of settlements considered in the research. While the scoring methodology is maintained across the two groups, the thresholds below which places emerge as having relatively weak transport provision are different.

Scoring

Stage two of the transport deserts methodology is based on a simple indicative scoring system for each settlement. The scoring methodology seeks to capture the extent and usefulness of the public transport services in a way that is relatively simple and easy to understand.

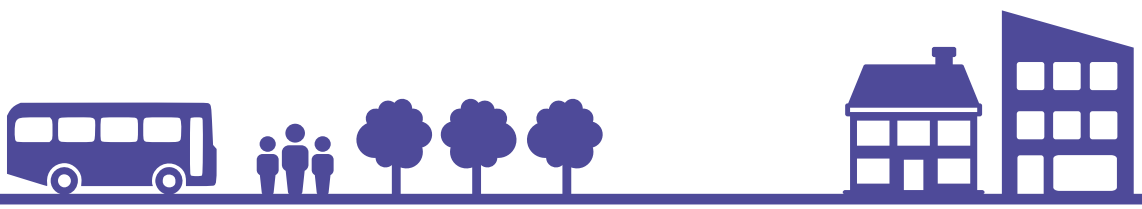
Marks are given for frequency of bus and train service in peak and off-peak periods, reflecting different user needs. Limited marks are also given for direct access to coach services and for taxi and community transport.

Overall, more points are available for good bus services than for good rail, although the gap between the two is relatively narrow. Buses are more flexible in their destinations and are significantly more heavily used across the country than rail. However, in considering the strategic importance of the public transport available (as the methodology seeks to do), rail is able to offer an important connection to a national network.

To score well overall, a place needs to be well-served by both bus and rail, reflecting the different strengths of the two modes. Beneath this, scoring should reward good provision. For example, towns with strong bus connections will score better than those which offer both bus and rail services but only a limited service across either.

Bus services to a major settlement

Points	Peak	Off-peak
4 points	Six or more buses per hour	Four per hour or more with services after 10pm weekdays and weekends
3 points	Four to five commuter buses per hour	Three per hour with services after 9pm weekdays and weekends
2 points	Two to three buses per hour	Two per hour with services after 9pm weekdays and weekends
1 point	One commuter bus per hour	One service per hour with some evening services
0 points	Less than hourly service at peak times	Fewer than one service per hour, with services stopping before 8pm



Rail services

Points	Peak	Off-peak
3 points	Three services per hour or more	More than one service per hour
2 points	One to two services per hour	One service per hour
1 point	Less than hourly service	Fewer than one service per hour
0 points	No station	No station

Other transport

Points	Service and frequency
2 points	Frequent coach service (three or more per day)
1 point	Occasional coach service (fewer than three per day)
1 point	Community transport with occasional timetabled and on-demand service
1 point	Taxi/ride sharing serving the town
2-3 points	Other (e.g. light rail, ferry)

Drawing on the scoring methodology, towns included in the research are judged to fall into the following overall scoring classification:

- Green – Satisfactorily connected
  (large towns 11 points or more, small towns 9 points or more)
- Amber – At risk of becoming a transport desert
  (large towns 7 to 10 points, small towns 5 to 8 points)
- Red – Transport desert
  (large towns 6 points or fewer, small towns 4 points or fewer)

Findings

The research methodology has been applied to two regions of England; the North East and the South West. These were selected as examples of regions with large rural areas which experience a diverse range of social and economic challenges.

In the South West **111** settlements and small towns have been identified.
In the North East **51** settlements and small towns have been identified.

South West England

Transport oases – best connected

Top 5 larger settlements
(12,000–30,000 people)

Place	County	Score
Nailsea	Somerset	17
Saltash	Cornwall	16
Penzance	Cornwall	15
Newton Abbot	Devon	15
Tiverton	Devon	15

Top 5 small settlements
(5,000–12,000 people)

Place	County	Score
St Blazey	Cornwall	14
Liskeard	Cornwall	13
Wareham	Dorset	12
Bodmin	Cornwall	12
Totnes	Devon	12

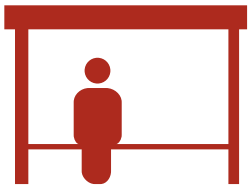
Transport deserts – worst connected

Bottom 7 larger settlements
(12,000–30,000 people)

Place	County	Score
Sidmouth	Devon	6
Ferndown	Dorset	6
Wimborne Minster	Dorset	6
Calne	Wiltshire	6
Frampton Cotterell	Gloucestershire	6
Innsworth	Gloucestershire	6
Verwood	Dorset	4

Bottom 5 small settlements
(5,000–12,000 people)

Place	County	Score
Callington	Cornwall	3
Wincanton	Somerset	3
Shaftesbury	Dorset	3
St Leonards	Dorset	2
Ilminster	Somerset	2



Transport deserts

More than half of the places identified as at risk of becoming transport deserts fall in Dorset and Somerset. It is notable that these counties have weak rail provision and have made steep cuts to support for bus services in recent years.

Five Dorset towns feature amongst those most at risk of becoming transport deserts. Of the larger settlements, Verwood, Ferndown and Wimborne Minster score poorly while St Leonards and Shaftesbury fare equally badly amongst smaller places. All have weak bus services and no rail connection. Verwood, Ferndown and St Leonards are located close to one another but someway distant from the county's major settlements. Important resources such as the community hospital at St Leonards are not served by conventional bus services. All have been affected by cuts to support for bus services made by the county council which has reduced spending from £2.5 million a year in 2010/11 to just £1.2 million in 2018/19.[7]

While this reflects the constrained financial position that many local authorities find themselves in, it compares notably with the increased spending on buses afforded by Cornwall and Devon over the same period.

Ilminster in Somerset also scores poorly using the methodology. A growing town of approaching 6,000, it is located ten miles from Taunton and 15 miles from Yeovil. Two buses leave Ilminster for Taunton before 9am. There is then a less than hourly service through the day with the final weekday service from Taunton to Ilminster departing at 6.10pm. There are no direct bus services from Ilminster to Yeovil.

Transport oases

It is notable that eight of the highest scoring towns in the South West are in Devon or Cornwall. These counties have the twin benefits of relatively extensive rail networks and local authorities which have chosen to increase spending on buses since 2010.

With two of the top five large settlements and three of the top five smaller settlements, Cornwall's small and medium sized towns are over-represented among the best connected places in the South West.

There are key reasons why Cornwall and Devon's towns score highly in the transport deserts methodology. The counties have comparatively extensive rail networks. In total, there are 36 railway stations in Cornwall and 38 in Devon. This compares with just ten in Gloucestershire and 12 in Somerset. Only two of the eleven towns with a population of over 8,000 in Cornwall lack a rail connection. This compares with Dorset where only three of the nine towns with a population of over 8,000 have a station.

Cornwall and Devon also attract points for good coach services. Twelve towns included in the research in each of the two counties are served by regular coach services. This compares with just five towns looked at in the research across the entire North East region.

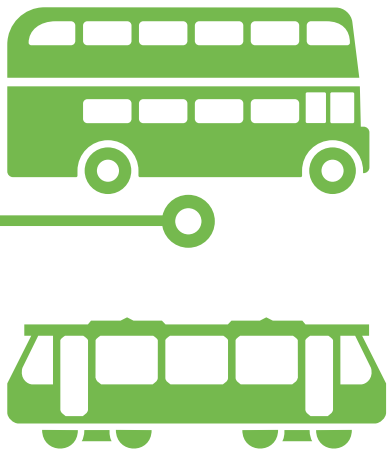
Cornwall in particular is taking active steps to improve its public transport provision. While some of its strengths are the result of historical decisions, reflect Cornwall's status as a tourism destination and its relatively linear geography, the county has also taken a highly proactive role in establishing well integrated public transport services and ticketing to provide some of the best rural public transport in the country (see case study).

Looking at scores for individual settlements across the South West, those scoring highly have frequent connections by bus and rail, often to a larger urban centre nearby. For example, Nailsea scores well because of its frequent bus and rail links to Bristol. Predominant in this is a service operated jointly by First Somerset and Avon, and ABUS, a local independent operator. This offers three buses an hour throughout the day on weekdays, with services starting before 6am and ending after 11pm. It should be noted, however, that in practice Nailsea and Backwell station is some distance outside of the town, somewhat reducing its usefulness to local residents who do not have a car or choose not to drive.

At a smaller scale, St Blazey benefits from close proximity to St Austell for both rail and bus services while Saltash also scores highly for having both frequent bus and rail connections to nearby Plymouth. Indeed, Saltash's buses are operated as part of the Plymouth City Bus network.

Other places are well connected because of their importance as destinations. For example, Penzance generates large numbers of visitors both as a local centre and from tourism. Public transport provision has responded to this, offering rail, bus and coach services.

Newton Abbot and Totnes, meanwhile, offer good connections in part because of their location between Plymouth and Exeter with a frequent rail service and 'inter-urban' bus connection. Tiverton benefits similarly from its position on the rail route between the centres of Taunton and Exeter.



The methodology shows clearly that a number of towns offer good public transport provision via frequent bus services. These include towns located near regional or sub-regional centres (Bishop's Cleeve (Cheltenham), Long Ashton (Bristol) and Highworth (Swindon) for example) highlighting the importance of accessing services and commuting in maintaining good public transport links.

Case Studies
South West England

Tavistock: Reconnecting rail

Tavistock scores relatively poorly on the transport deserts methodology and suffers with weak access to employment, higher education and training.

Devon County Council is actively pursuing a plan to re-establish the railway line between Tavistock and Bere Alston. An options assessment carried out for Devon County Council found "linking Tavistock to the national rail network will have a significant impact on the ability of the town to attract inward investment, economic and employment growth" and "would provide a new, sustainable link between Tavistock and Plymouth for commuter journeys".

There would also be strategic benefits from the scheme. Importantly, re-establishing the Okehampton and Tavistock section would add to the overall resilience of the South West's rail network, creating a second route to Devon and Cornwall running north of Dartmoor and providing an alternative to the exposed coastal route via Dawlish.

Progress with the project has been slow. Financing of rail works is dependent on developer contributions from house building at Tavistock. Given its strategic significance and benefits, there is a strong case for advancing the project more swiftly through regional or national support.

Cornwall: Integrated rural transport

Bus and rail services can sometimes be less than the sum of their parts, operating as largely separate networks. Cornwall is showing that rural areas can develop integrated public transport networks that put many urban centres to shame.

Using railway stations as hubs, the county council has spearheaded the creation of a single public transport network for the county. Along with more frequent services on the railway between Penzance and Plymouth, an integrated bus-rail timetable has been implemented and joint ticketing introduced. The improvements have been enabled by the county's devolution deal with the Government but have also been supported by bus operators (including First Kernow) investing in new vehicles and funding for the installation of contactless ticketing technology by the Local Enterprise Partnership. This has helped ensure comprehensive coverage with bus-rail interchanges being created at the main railway stations.

Bridport – Yeovil: The case for multi operator tickets

Many local areas are served by two or more bus operators, but with few offering tickets which can be used on their competitor's services, passengers can find themselves needing to buy two tickets to complete their journey.

For example, when a bus operator withdrew an hourly direct service between Bridport and Yeovil, the impact of less frequent services and increased journey times was compounded by the need to use two bus operators for many journeys and pay a higher price for two separate tickets to complete the 18 mile journey.

Even where routes are changed or reduced, employing smart ticketing technology and revenue sharing agreements between operators is essential in maintaining passenger levels and network coherence.

Bath to Wells: The potential of inter-urban buses

Inter-urban bus services offer potential for rural public transport, creating quality services that better connect larger towns with their rural hinterland. Targeting connections to larger places and combining services aimed at commuters and leisure travellers has been achieved through a mixture of long-term consistency of routing, higher frequency, better vehicles, branding and other aspects of service quality.

The route linking Bath and Wells (via Peasedown, Radstock and Midsomer Norton) has been in operation since the 1960s, giving several small towns a consistent connection to Bath.

The route operates as part of First Group's Mendip Explorer brand and runs up to four buses an hour. Service frequency was increased in 2015,[8] with the improved attractiveness of the offer contributing to higher overall passenger numbers requiring double-decker buses to replace some overcrowded single deckers from 2018.

Research[9] has highlighted how a growth in journey numbers has been achieved through a mixture of long-term consistency of routing, higher frequency, better vehicles, branding and other aspects of service quality. The experience of TrawsCymru in Wales and Fife's Express City Connect suggests that further developing and promoting such services as networks may hold the key to their long-term success.[10]

North East England

Transport oases – best connected

Top 5 larger settlements (12,000–30,000 people)

Place	County	Score
Morpeth	Northumberland	16
Hexham	Northumberland	16
Blaydon	Tyne & Wear	15
Berwick-upon-Tweed	Northumberland	14
Chester-le-Street	County Durham	14

Top 5 small settlements (5,000–12,000 people)

Place	County	Score
Marske-by-the-Sea	Redcar and Cleveland	16
Saltburn	Redcar and Cleveland	16
Prudhoe	Northumberland	15
Eaglescliffe	County Durham	14
Shildon	County Durham	12

At risk of becoming transport deserts – worst connected

Bottom 9 larger settlements (12,000–30,000 people)

Place	County	Score
Whickham	Tyne & Wear	10
Ryton	Tyne & Wear	10
Bedlington	Northumberland	10
Consett	County Durham	10
Guisborough	Redcar and Cleveland	10
Houghton-le-Spring	Tyne & Wear	10
Hetton-le-Hole	Tyne & Wear	10
Stanley	County Durham	9
Spennymoor	County Durham	9

Bottom 6 small settlements (5,000–12,000 people)

Place	County	Score
Ponteland	Northumberland	7
Newbiggin	Northumberland	7
Ouston/Urpeth	County Durham	7
Alnwick	Northumberland	6
Seaton Delaval	Northumberland	6
Amble	Northumberland	6

Transport oases

Four Northumberland towns score highly on the transport deserts methodology occupying two of the top five places for both larger and smaller settlements. Hexham, Berwick, Prudhoe and Morpeth all have very good rail connections.

Of the larger Northumberland towns without rail links, Ashington and Bedlington score maximum points for their bus services. It is also notable that well-developed plans to re-establish passenger services on an operational freight rail line would connect Ashington, Bedlington and Newbiggin by the Sea to the rail network at Newcastle.

The North East recorded four bus routes reduced or withdrawn in 2017/18 compared with the previous year while local authority spending on supporting buses was the second highest in England outside of London.[11] From 2010 to 2018, County Durham increased its spending on supporting buses by £700,000 to just over £3m per year. Over the same period, while Northumberland initially made steep cuts, funding for buses has stabilised over the last four years.[12]

At risk of becoming transport deserts

Of the 22 County Durham towns included in the research, only six have rail connections. Unlike in Northumberland, none of these scored maximum points for frequency of service.

However, all of the 22 towns score well for bus provision at both peak and off-peak times. In the more built-up counties of Tyne & Wear and Redcar & Cleveland, where large conurbations are within easy striking distance, towns all scored highly for their bus services. For example, Consett offers weekday services to Newcastle city centre from 5.20am to 10.30pm. Evening services to Consett from Newcastle run until 11.30pm.

Case Studies
The North East

New rural rail connections: Lessons from Border Rail

The Borders Railway is a 35-mile line connecting Edinburgh with the Scottish borders. Completed in 2015 at a cost of £350 million, it links a series of towns with populations of 15,000 and less together with a large rural hinterland to the capital.

Concerns about the ability of the line to generate passenger numbers necessary to justify the investment have proved misplaced. The financial case for the Borders Railway was predicated on annual passenger numbers of 650,000. Actual numbers have been much higher; 1.3 million in the first year rising to 1.45 million by the third year of operation.

The Borders Railway is credited with supporting the local tourist economy and removing around 40,000 car journeys from the area's roads, although it has also contributed to reduced numbers of local bus journeys. Plans are being considered to extend the line to Carlisle, creating a new strategic north - south connection through the borders.

The success of the Borders Railway scheme has demonstrated that new and re-opened lines can be viable for smaller settlements in predominantly rural areas. For the study areas in this report, it offers important lessons for other potential passenger rail projects such as Tavistock and Portishead in the South West and the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne, and Leamside lines in the North East.

Tees Valley: Mobility as a Service in rural areas

Where bus services have been lost, one solution is to introduce demand-responsive transport which relies on passengers pre-booking their journey. This model has long been deployed by community transport operators but growth in smart phone apps and the establishment of companies such as Uber has transformed the demand responsive model, which has a far more widespread availability.

There are a number of rural areas that are starting to dip their toes into Mobility as a Service. In the Tees Valley for instance, a new 'Uber-style' on-demand bus service is set to be launched later in the year.[13] Passengers will be able to order buses on the phone, via an app or through a website. The system will match up passengers travelling in the same direction and schedule vehicles to find the fastest route. Passengers can also select destinations outside the service area. The pilot scheme, which is set to run for three years, is being introduced to help boost economic activity and improve access to jobs in an area that has a notoriously poor public transport network. This forms part of its Strategic Transport Plan, which aims to offer a high quality, affordable and reliable transport network.

Consett

Consett is significantly at risk of becoming a transport desert. The settlement grew up as a Derwent Valley steel town. It was badly affected by the closure of the industry in 1980, with unemployment at one point reaching 36 per cent. Passenger rail services ended in 1965, but it was not until the closure of the steel industry that freight movements also ceased, the line was removed and with sections of track were built on in Consett.

Despite its relatively remote location and absence of rail links, the 2011 census found that 31 per cent of households had no car. The town currently does have very frequent bus services offering regular links to Durham, Sunderland and Newcastle. However, it is noted that 23 services are council subsidised. Given the ongoing pressure on council budgets, there is the potential for this support being reduced or removed in the future.

Against national trends, local trunk roads saw increases in traffic of over ten per cent between 2005-13.

County Durham would like to undertake ambitious growth plans in terms of jobs, housing and infrastructure. These plans have been controversial, and the Planning Inspectorate has questioned whether they can be implemented. Even if they were, Consett's location works against it and the town stands to gain only some new housing suggesting its future will rely on increased commuting.

Next steps

The transport deserts methodology aims to assess the strategic public transport connections offered by small and medium sized towns. It has been developed to help identify those places which are particularly well or poorly served by current strategic public transport links. In so doing, it aims to highlight the pressures and opportunities that accessibility has for communities outside of the country's main towns and cities.

There are also very important geographic differences that should be considered in reading the research. For example, some towns of 15,000 people will act as a commuter settlement for a larger regionally important conurbation. In others, a place of that size will itself be the sub-regional centre, drawing in people and generating journeys from a hinterland. The kinds of public transport services offered will clearly need to reflect these differing roles. To retain its simplicity, the transport deserts scoring methodology does not seek to capture this nuance. Instead the primary focus is to reflect how well the town in question connects strategically to regional centres.

The report includes case studies that exemplify good practice and research exposing weakness in current provision. It does not propose tailored solutions to shortcomings in existing local transport provision. Nor does the methodology take account of limitations resulting from geographic accessibility. The need for resources and skills to develop solutions to meet local needs and circumstance is, however, one of the key recommendations of the report.

The methodology is deliberately light touch and is intended to highlight common transport issues faced by small and medium sized towns. While it is hoped the research methodology will be useful to communities and policy makers within both the initial study areas and more widely, it is not intended in any way to take the place of more detailed local work necessary to understand and respond to the specific needs of each community.

Recommendations for further assessment

A table of the highest and lowest scoring towns offers only a snapshot of local transport provision. Further work is needed to understand fully the consequences of poor local public transport provision and in developing interventions to address problems identified in this report. This should cover:

How self sufficient

How able is the settlement or town to support itself and how does this affect the type of transport it needs? This looks at a range of local factors such as the accessibility of education, employment and health services.

Usefulness and relevance of transport services

To establish how useful local buses are, basic information on numbers of services needs to be augmented with data on passenger numbers.

Local data

In addition to looking at public transport availability, an assessment of demographic factors would allow consideration of present and future pressures on transport services. It also allows consideration of the area's performance against other data such as that held in the Indices of Multiple Deprivation.

Cycling and walking

Cycling and walking are clearly relevant to the research and consideration should be given to the provision of infrastructure to support them. Judging the quality and usefulness of the infrastructure can only be assessed via local examination and interaction.

Plans for the future

Also considered should be plans for major changes to transport infrastructure, new housing and employment sites.

Conclusions and recommendations

Counties which have managed to maintain their spending in support of bus services contain fewer towns at risk of becoming transport deserts. Geographically isolated towns that are someway distant from large conurbations are more at risk of becoming transport deserts. However, as the frequent buses serving towns in the more remote parts of County Durham show, this does not need to be the case.

The scoring methodology does not find that those towns with rail connections have noticeably different bus service levels than those towns that are not connected to the rail network. This suggests bus and rail can be seen as complementary rather than in competition, further highlighting the potential benefits to passengers and communities of integrated planning and ticketing across public transport.

Equally, rural counties such as Cornwall and Devon that lack very large centres of population mainly score well by the Transport Deserts methodology, showing it is possible to retain good levels of connectivity without adjacency to major cities.

Towns which are near to regional centres or on transport routes between large towns are more likely to be served by frequent rail and bus services.

Weaknesses in rural public transport networks deny people access to work, learning, healthcare, choice of shops and social and cultural activities. It can contribute to isolation and loneliness, worsen economic hardship, fuel a well of unsustainable car dependency and contribute to air pollution and carbon emissions.

A national package of measures is needed to improve public transport in rural areas. This must include a national bus strategy to improve services, a rural mobility strategy to ensure rural areas take advantage of technological developments in transport operation and planning, a rural transport fund and a capacity building programme for local authorities, allowing them to take control of their local transport networks.

5 of the top 10
best connected places in the South West are in Cornwall

The amount central government spends supporting the England national bus pass has fallen since 2009, declining by
13% **by 2017/18**

Borders Railway attracted
over 4 million
passenger journeys in its first three years of operation

National interventions

A National Bus Strategy

Buses remain the most popular form of public transport, accounting for more journeys than all other modes combined. But despite the essential part they play for millions of people in getting to work or school, accessing vital services and tackling isolation, buses have been neglected over the last decade.

Almost £400 million of local and national government funding has been lost, hundreds of bus services have been withdrawn or cut, and fares have increased by 63 per cent in real terms as operators try to keep services on the road.[14] In rural areas, this has left communities poorly served or cut off while in our cities, poor infrastructure and older vehicles contribute to pollution and congestion. The absence of a coherent policy for buses is in contrast to every other mode of transport.

Uniquely for a major transport mode, the UK has had no national strategy for buses. To address this, the Government's proposed national bus strategy should set out a clear policy direction for buses and emphasise their role and importance for local transport. The strategy should focus on delivering four aims:

Increased usage of bus services across the country

A clear route to zero emission buses

Better integration of buses with other transport

Growth in use of technology to improve services

A national programme of rail reopenings

As the Borders Railway project clearly shows, in some cases re-establishing passenger rail connections via new or reopened lines offers an appropriate way of addressing weaknesses in rural public transport provision. The development of such proposals is both time consuming and highly expensive. Currently, the process is heavily dependent on local authorities for leadership and financial support with the outcome that few projects reach fruition.

To address this, a nationally administered and funded programme of reopenings should be established to encourage investment in new rail infrastructure and to ensure the most beneficial projects (including those in rural areas) are developed and built. The programme should include identification of appropriate schemes, their detailed development and appropriate means of funding delivery.

The strategy should be underpinned by:

Local multi-year funding

A single long-term funding framework should be established for revenue and capital support for buses. This would give local authorities and bus operators the ability to plan for the longer term and ensure the sustainability of critical services for communities while stemming the cuts in services and seeking to increase patronage. The framework should bring together all public sector spending on buses, including concessionary travel, NHS patient transport, school transport and social services.

There is also a case for a ring-fenced rural transport grant allocated to local authorities to ensure mobility for rural populations who do not live in settlements with the critical demand needed for commercial services.

All new vehicles to be zero emissions

Increasing the percentage of journeys which are taken by bus has the potential to cut carbon emissions and tackle local air pollution while helping reduce road congestion. While the technology to support this aim is already in place, a plan and funding to replace the entire UK bus and coach fleet with zero emission vehicles is needed. The Government should set the following timeline for the bus sector to transition to zero emission buses:

From 2025
all new buses should be
zero emission

From 2035
all buses on the road should be
zero emission

Such an approach would also support jobs in bus manufacturing and the supply chain, and help establish the UK as an international leader on zero emission mass transport.

National innovation and integration funding

Funding is needed to ensure buses are part of the transport network of the future. The way people travel is changing. With the emergence of ride sharing and Mobility as a Service there is an opportunity to ensure buses can take advantage of their natural strengths. A programme of investment in physical and digital infrastructure to support buses is needed. This should include a new generation of rural transport hubs to support modal interchanges and incentives to encourage the development of multi-modal ticketing and integrated journey planning.

Local authority spending on buses fell by
43%
between 2009/10 and 2018/19

Cornwall increased its spending on buses by
18%
between 2009/10 and 2018/19

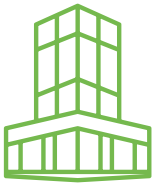
A future of rural mobility strategy

The opportunity for technology to transform transport in our cities is hugely exciting, but it could also be the key to developing and maintaining vibrant rural economies by supporting better access to services like education, health, training and employment. However, the case for transport investment in rural areas and small towns is different than in cities and is arguably more complex. In cities, transport technology like lift sharing and journey planning aims to deliver efficiency and productivity, but in rural areas the focus should be on helping communities thrive, tackling isolation and improving access to services. The financial returns on offer are unlikely to attract early private sector investment meaning public funding will be crucial to ensuring more rural areas benefit from new technology.

Government should develop a specific strategy for the future of rural mobility focusing on how the ideas captured under the theme of Mobility as a Service can be applied to create improved networks of rural transport.

Shortcomings in rural public transport are often more acute and difficult to solve than in urban transport. In recognition of this, the government has committed to developing a rural mobility strategy. The strategy should be brought forward at the earliest opportunity, and should build an evidence base and provide guidance on:

The effectiveness of different approaches to comprehensive public transport provision in rural areas



The contribution rural public transport provision can make to the provision and accessibility of essential services

Transport appraisal and modelling to ensure it is responsive to the specific needs of rural areas

Supporting the development and deployment of zero emissions public transport in rural areas

The overall aim of the strategy should be to reconnect rural communities through sustainable transport

Support for local authorities

Capacity building

Top tier authorities should have more power to manage and develop local transport networks. The forthcoming Rail White Paper and the announcement that all top tier local authorities will be able to take on bus franchising powers are important steps in making this achievable. However, outside large cities local authorities lack the capacity, capability and resources needed to take on such powers. Where there is a settled case for increasing local control, transition funding should be provided by central government in the form of a local transport devolution package.

Cornwall has demonstrated how bus franchising powers can be used to significantly improve public transport provision in a rural area. While franchising is in principle available to all top tier local authorities, many rural areas now lack the institutional memory and skills required to oversee and improve bus services in their area.

To improve management of public transport networks and ensure local authorities can use the powers in the Bus Services Act effectively, the Government should:

Develop a central team within Whitehall that can be deployed to aid local authorities in building capability in-house on legal, costing services, running and monitoring concessions or contracts, and management of relationships.

Create an innovation fund to support those authorities moving to a franchise-based model. This should cover meeting the initial setup costs for procurement and management of contracts, improving skill and capability on partnership working and contract monitoring.

Information and journey planning

To make it easier for people to understand and use public transport in their area, local authorities should ensure adequate information is provided on bus services, including the integration with other modes. One way of doing this is via financial support for trials of innovative approaches such as the 'Uber-style' demand responsive rural transport project being developed by the Tees Valley Combined Authority. This requires working with transport providers, service users and larger journey generators (for example, major employers and hospitals) to develop bus networks which are better integrated and more responsive to rural needs.

Reducing the cost of travel

One of the barriers to increasing use of bus services is the cost to passengers. Giving some groups highly discounted or free bus travel can bring wide benefits both to the individual and to wider society. Using either a system of mobility credits or directly subsidised fares, national government should support targeted local low fares trials with a commitment to roll out the initiative more broadly if it is successful at supporting modal shift and improving access to important services.

Annex 1: South West scoring tables

Cornwall

Town	Local Authority	Population (2011)	Rail		Bus		Other transport				Total
			Peak	Off-peak	Peak	Off-peak	Coach	Community transport	Taxi	other	
St Austell	Cornwall	25,447	2	3	2	2	1	1	1	0	12
Truro	Cornwall	23,041	2	3	3	3	1	1	1	0	14
Newquay	Cornwall	20,189	1	1	2	2	1	1	1	0	9
Penzance	Cornwall	19,872	2	3	3	3	2	1	1	0	15
Saltash	Cornwall	15,566	2	3	3	4	2	1	1	0	16
Bodmin	Cornwall	14,614	2	3	2	2	1	1	1	0	12
Helston	Cornwall	12,184	0	0	2	2	1	1	1	0	7
St Ives	Cornwall	9,966	1	3	2	2	0	1	1	0	10
St Blazey (including Par)	Cornwall	9,958	2	3	3	3	1	1	1	0	14
Liskeard	Cornwall	9,237	2	3	2	2	2	1	1	0	13
Launceston	Cornwall	8,910	0	0	2	2	1	1	1	0	7
Hayle	Cornwall	8,210	1	1	2	2	1	1	1	0	9
Torpoint	Cornwall	7,717	0	0	2	2	0	1	1	2	8
Bude (including Stratton)	Cornwall	7,011	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	4
Wadebridge	Cornwall	6,599	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	4
Callington	Cornwall	5,786	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	3
Looe	Cornwall	5,112	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	6

Town	Local Authority	Population (2011)	Rail		Bus		Other transport				Total
			Peak	Off-peak	Peak	Off-peak	Coach	Community transport	Taxi	other	
Barnstaple	Devon	24,033	1	2	3	3	2	1	1	0	13
Newton Abbot	Devon	24,029	3	3	3	3	1	1	1	0	15
Tiverton	Devon	21,335	3	3	3	3	2	1	1	0	16
Brixham	Devon	16,693	0	0	3	3	2	1	1	0	10
Bideford	Devon	16,610	0	0	3	3	1	1	1	0	9
Teignmouth	Devon	14,749	3	3	2	2	1	1	1	0	13
Sidmouth	Devon	13,737	0	0	2	2	0	1	1	0	6
Dawlish	Devon	13,161	3	3	2	2	0	1	1	0	12
Tavistock	Devon	12,280	0	0	3	4	0	1	1	0	9
Northam	Devon	12,062	0	0	2	2	1	1	1	0	7
Ivybridge	Devon	11,851	1	2	2	2	1	1	1	0	10
Ilfracombe	Devon	11,509	0	0	3	2	1	1	1	0	8
Honiton	Devon	11,156	1	2	1	2	0	1	1	0	8
Kingsteignton	Devon	10,451	0	0	2	2	0	1	1	0	6
Cullompton	Devon	8,499	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	5
Crediton	Devon	7,600	1	2	2	2	0	1	1	0	9
Totnes	Devon	7,456	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	0	12
Bovey Tracey	Devon	7,168	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	4
Okehampton	Devon	7,104	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	5
Seaton	Devon	7,096	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	4
Axminster	Devon	6,557	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	6
Kingsbridge	Devon	5,887	0	0	1	2	0	1	1	0	5
Great Torrington	Devon	5,714	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	4
Dartmouth	Devon	5,605	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	4
Budleigh Salterton	Devon	5,185	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	4

Dorset

Town	Local Authority	Population (2011)	Rail		Bus		Other transport				Total
			Peak	Off-peak	Peak	Off-peak	Coach	Community transport	Taxi	other	
Ferndown	Dorset	5,496	0	0	2	2	0	1	1	0	6
Dorchester	Dorset	19,060	2	3	3	2	2	1	1	0	14
Wimborne Minster	Dorset	15,174	0	0	2	2	0	1	1	0	6
Bridport	Dorset	13,737	0	0	2	2	1	1	1	0	7
Verwood	Dorset	13,360	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	4
Blandford Forum	Dorset	11,694	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	4
Gillingham	Dorset	11,278	2	3	1	0	0	1	1	0	8
Swanage	Dorset	10,454	0	0	2	2	1	1	1	0	7
Sherborne	Dorset	9,523	3	3	1	1	0	1	1	0	10
Shaftesbury	Dorset	7,314	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	3
Weston / Easton (Portland)	Dorset	6,069	0	0	3	4	0	1	1	0	9
Merley / Oakley	Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole	6,005	0	0	2	1	0	1	1	0	5
St Leonards	Dorset	5,984	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	3
Wareham	Dorset	5,496	2	3	2	2	2	1	1	0	13

Town	Local Authority	Population (2011)	Rail		Bus		Other transport				Total
			Peak	Off-peak	Peak	Off-peak	Coach	Community transport	Taxi	other	
Tewkesbury	Tewkesbury	19,778	1	1	3	3	1	1	1	0	11
Cirencester	Cotswold	16,325	0	0	3	3	2	1	1	0	10
Frampton Cotterell / Winterbourne	South Gloucestershire	14,694	0	0	2	2	0	1	1	0	6
Dursley	Stroud	14,542	2	2	2	3	0	1	1	0	11
Innsworth	Tewkesbury	13,458	0	0	2	2	0	1	1	0	6
Bishop's Cleeve	Tewkesbury	13,273	0	0	3	4	0	1	1	0	9
Downend	South Gloucestershire	12,125	0	0	3	4	0	1	1	0	9
Thornbury	South Gloucestershire	11,687	0	0	2	3	0	1	1	0	7
Cinderford	Forest of Dean	10,508	0	0	2	2	0	1	1	0	6
Lydney	Forest of Dean	8,776	2	1	2	2	0	1	1	0	9
Nailsworth	Stroud	7,728	0	0	2	1	0	1	1	0	5
Stonehouse	Stroud	7,400	1	1	2	2	0	1	1	0	8
Chalford	Stroud	6,876	0	0	2	2	0	1	1	0	6
Wotton-under-Edge	Stroud	5,627	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	4
Tetbury	Cotswold	5,472	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	3
Coleford	Forest of Dean	5,103	0	0	1	2	0	1	1	0	5

Somerset

Town	Local Authority	Population (2011)	Rail		Bus		Other transport				Total
			Peak	Off-peak	Peak	Off-peak	Coach	Community transport	Taxi	other	
Frome	Mendip	26,203	2	1	3	3	1	1	1	0	12
Portishead	North Somerset	23,699	0	0	3	4	0	1	1	0	9
Burnham-on-Sea / Highbridge	Sedgemoor	23,325	2	1	3	4	1	1	1	0	13
Clevedon	North Somerset	21,002	0	0	2	3	1	1	1	0	8
Nailsea	North Somerset	16,060	3	3	4	4	1	1	1	0	17
Keynsham	Bath and North East Somerset	15,641	2	3	3	3	0	1	1	0	13
Chard	South Somerset	13,074	0	0	2	3	0	1	1	0	7
Street	Mendip	12,911	0	0	3	3	1	1	1	0	9
Midsomer Norton	Bath and North East Somerset	12,415	0	0	3	3	0	1	1	0	8
Minehead	Somerset West and Taunton	11,981	0	0	2	2	2	1	1	1	9
Wellington	Somerset West and Taunton	11,213	0	0	2	2	2	1	1	0	8
Wells	Mendip	10,536	0	0	2	3	2	1	1	0	9
Shepton Mallet	Mendip	10,369	0	0	2	2	1	1	1	0	7
Radstock	Bath and North East Somerset	9,419	0	0	3	3	1	1	1	0	9
Glastonbury	Mendip	8,471	0	0	2	2	1	1	1	1	8
Crewkerne	South Somerset	7,826	2	2	1	0	0	1	1	0	7
Yatton	North Somerset	7,203	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	6
Peasedown St John	Bath and North East Somerset	6,269	0	0	3	3	1	1	1	0	9
Ilminster	South Somerset	5,808	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	2
Wincanton	South Somerset	5,435	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	3
Paulton	Bath and North East Somerset	5,302	0	0	3	3	0	1	1	0	8
Long Ashton	North Somerset	5,254	0	0	3	4	0	1	1	0	9
Cheddar	Sedgemoor	5,199	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	4

Town	Local Authority	Population (2011)	Rail		Bus		Other transport				Total
			Peak	Off-peak	Peak	Off-peak	Coach	Community transport	Taxi	other	
Melksham	Wiltshire	19,357	1	1	3	4	1	1	1	0	12
Devizes	Wiltshire	18,064	0	0	2	2	1	1	1	1	8
Warminster	Wiltshire	17,490	2	3	2	2	1	1	1	0	12
Calne	Wiltshire	17,274	0	0	2	2	0	1	1	0	6
Westbury	Wiltshire	16,989	2	3	2	2	0	1	1	0	11
Corsham	Wiltshire	13,432	0	0	2	3	1	1	1	0	8
Wootton Bassett	Wiltshire	11,265	0	0	3	3	0	1	1	0	8
Amesbury	Wiltshire	10,116	0	0	2	2	2	1	1	0	8
Tidworth	Wiltshire	9,174	0	0	2	2	0	1	1	0	6
Bradford-on-Avon	Wiltshire	9,149	2	3	2	2	0	1	1	0	11
Bulford Camp	Wiltshire	8,556	0	0	2	3	0	1	1	0	7
Marlborough	Wiltshire	8,092	0	0	2	2	0	1	1	0	6
Highworth	Swindon	7,886	0	0	3	4	0	1	1	0	9
Wroughton	Swindon	6,474	0	0	3	4	0	1	1	0	9
Malmesbury	Wiltshire	6,318	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	4

Annex 2: North East scoring tables

County Durham

Town	Local Authority	Population (2011)	Rail		Bus		Other transport				Total
			Peak	Off-peak	Peak	Off-peak	Coach	Community transport	Taxi	other	
Newton Aycliffe	County Durham	26,663	1	2	4	4	0	1	1	0	13
Bishop Auckland	County Durham	25,455	1	2	3	4	0	1	1	0	12
Consett	County Durham	24,828	0	0	4	4	0	1	1	0	10
Chester-le-Street	County Durham	24,227	2	2	3	4	1	1	1	0	14
Peterlee	County Durham	20,164	0	0	4	4	1	1	1	0	11
Stanley	County Durham	21,938	0	0	3	4	0	1	1	0	9
Seaham	County Durham	20,172	2	2	3	4	0	1	1	0	13
Spennymoor	County Durham	19,816	0	0	3	4	0	1	1	0	9
Crook	County Durham	10,019	0	0	3	3	0	1	1	0	8
Shildon	County Durham	9,976	1	2	3	4	0	1	1	0	12
Brandon	County Durham	9,566	0	0	4	4	0	1	1	0	10
Ferryhill	County Durham	8,942	0	0	4	4	0	1	1	0	10
Eaglescliffe	Stockton-on-Tees (North)	8,559	3	2	3	4	0	1	1	0	14
Pelton	County Durham	8,250	0	0	4	4	0	1	1	0	10
Annfield Plain	County Durham	7,774	0	0	4	4	0	1	1	0	10
Ouston / Urpeth	County Durham	7,490	0	0	3	2	0	1	1	0	7
Murton	County Durham	7,413	0	0	3	3	0	1	1	0	8
Easington / Easington Colliery	County Durham	7,193	0	0	4	4	0	1	1	0	10
Willington	County Durham	5,749	0	0	3	4	0	1	1	0	9
Barnard Castle	County Durham	5,495	0	0	3	3	0	1	1	0	8
Wingate	County Durham	5,134	0	0	3	3	0	1	1	0	8
Sedgefield	County Durham	5,211	0	0	3	4	0	1	1	0	9

Northumberland

Town	Local Authority	Population (2011)	Rail		Bus		Other transport				Total
			Peak	Off-peak	Peak	Off-peak	Coach	Community transport	Taxi	other	
Ashington	Northumberland	27,670	0	0	4	4	1	1	1	0	11
Bedlington	Northumberland	16,974	0	0	4	4	0	1	1	0	10
Morpeth	Northumberland	14,403	3	3	3	4	1	1	1	0	16
Berwick-upon-Tweed	Northumberland	13,265	3	3	2	2	2	1	1	0	14
Hexham	Northumberland	11,388	3	3	4	4	0	1	1	0	16
Prudhoe	Northumberland	10,853	3	3	3	4	0	1	1	0	15
Ponteland	Northumberland	10,135	0	0	2	3	0	1	1	0	7
Stakeford/Guide Post	Northumberland	8,642	0	0	3	4	0	1	1	0	9
Alnwick	Northumberland	8,116	0	0	2	2	0	1	1	0	6
Seaton Delaval	Northumberland	7,509	0	0	2	2	0	1	1	0	6
Newbiggin-by-the-Sea	Northumberland	6,308	0	0	2	3	0	1	1	0	7
Amble	Northumberland	6,025	0	0	2	2	0	1	1	0	6

Redcar and Cleveland

Town	Local Authority	Population (2011)	Rail		Bus		Other transport				Total
			Peak	Off-peak	Peak	Off-peak	Coach	Community transport	Taxi	other	
Guisborough	Redcar and Cleveland	16,979	0	0	4	4	0	1	1	0	10
Marske-by-the-Sea	Redcar and Cleveland	8,282	3	3	4	4	0	1	1	0	16
Skelton	Redcar and Cleveland	6,535	0	0	4	4	0	1	1	0	10
Saltburn-by-the-Sea	Redcar and Cleveland	5,958	3	3	4	4	0	1	1	0	16
Brotton	Redcar and Cleveland	5,394	0	0	3	3	0	1	1	0	8

Tyne and Wear

Town	Local Authority	Population (2011)	Rail		Bus		Other transport				Total
			Peak	Off-peak	Peak	Off-peak	Coach	Community transport	Taxi	other	
Whickham	Tyne and Wear	16,652	0	0	4	4	0	1	1	0	10
Ryton	Tyne and Wear	15,999	0	0	4	4	0	1	1	0	10
Blaydon	Tyne and Wear	15,155	3	2	4	4	0	1	1	0	15
Houghton-le-Spring	Tyne and Wear	13,863	0	0	4	4	0	1	1	0	10
Hetton-le-Hole	Tyne and Wear	12,127	0	0	4	4	0	1	1	0	10
Wideopen	Tyne and Wear	8,976	0	0	4	4	0	1	1	0	10
Fence Houses	Tyne and Wear	6,649	0	0	3	4	0	1	1	0	9
Rowlands Gill	Tyne and Wear	6,096	0	0	4	4	0	1	1	0	10
Throckley	Tyne and Wear	5,507	0	0	4	4	0	1	1	0	10
Annitsford	Tyne and Wear	5,497	0	0	4	4	0	1	1	0	10
Whitburn	Tyne and Wear	5,102	0	0	4	4	0	1	1	0	10

Campaign for Better Transport

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Campaign for Better Transport's vision is for all communities to have access to high quality, sustainable transport that meets their needs, improves quality of life and protects the environment.

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