

A NEW ROUTE

FOR LOCAL BUS SERVICES



About the NFWI

The National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI)

The National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) is an educational, social, non-party political and non-sectarian organisation. It was established to ensure that women are able to take an effective part in their community, learn together, widen their horizons, improve and develop the quality of their lives, and together influence local, national, and international affairs on issues that matter to them and their fellow members.

Founded in 1915, the NFWI is the largest voluntary women's membership organisation in the UK with over 200,000 members in over 6,000 Institutes across England, Wales, and the Islands. The NFWI has a long history of undertaking educational work and campaigning on a diverse range of issues. The first NFWI mandate was passed in 1918 and since then the organisation has accumulated a wide-ranging portfolio of policy concerns on a local, national, and international level. The NFWI resolution process means that members play a central role in defining policy and bringing issues onto the organisation's national agenda.

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We are also grateful to all those organisations who have already published work in this area.

Foreword



At the 2019 Annual Meeting, with bus services under threat across England, Wales and the Islands, WI members passed a resolution calling on both local and national governments to take action.

Bus services play a vital role in ensuring communities remain sustainable, helping to reduce social isolation and ensure access to employment, education, local facilities and health services. Our Get on Board campaign seeks to raise awareness of the importance of local bus services and the impact of cuts on communities.

We know that women are disproportionately affected as research shows that men and women use transport differently, and their needs are different. According to the Department for Transport, women make a third more journeys by bus than men outside of London. We also know that women are more likely than men to have caregiving duties and be in part-time work which can mean taking multiple short journeys during the day that are not supported by the current transport system.

Our research, and that of others, highlights the consequences of this, such as difficulties accessing key services, employment opportunities and increased isolation, and the need to ensure access to reliable and frequent bus services consistently across England and Wales.

Our report calls for further investment in bus services, and whilst we welcome government commitments to bus services through the National Bus Strategy for England and the Llywybr Newydd: the Wales Transport Strategy 2021, the travelling patterns of women and the needs of those in rural areas must be taken into account. Given the highly gendered nature of this issue, it is also imperative that women play a more significant role in the decision-making, planning and design of public transport policy.

Access to reliable bus services can help to address environmental concerns, and can play a key role in reducing congestion and carbon emissions. Our research highlights the need to enable and encourage people to use public transport, and reduce their dependency on cars, in order to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050 and a reduction in microplastic pollution.

This past year has been unprecedented in many regards. The Coronavirus pandemic has brought about further changes to bus usage, including changes to the demand and availability of bus services due to rules on essential travel as well as public fear of the safety of public transport.

In March 2021, the UK Government published *Bus Back Better*, the National Bus Strategy for England, which has reviewed the way services are funded. In Wales, the Welsh Government published *Llywybr Newydd: the Wales Transport Strategy 2021*, which includes a focus on bus services. I hope that this report will encourage decision makers to go further and explore future planning and design of bus services in the changing context of Covid-19 to ensure all communities have access to the lifeline that is bus services.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lynne Stubbings". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Lynne Stubbings, NFWI Chair

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of the NFWI's research on the availability of bus services in England and Wales, and public attitudes towards using them. The survey was carried out between August and September 2020 and received 2,493 responses. Whilst it was open to all, including members of the public, 98% of respondents described their gender as female. This data is supplemented by 142 case studies submitted by WI members across England and Wales in 2019.

Our report builds on the existing work already published in this area by highlighting the impacts of cuts to bus services on women and people living in rural areas. It also explores the impacts of a significant reduction in local bus services on mental health, isolation and social exclusion. Our report highlights several key issues that, together with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, must be taken into account in future transport policy, and as part of a Covid-19 green recovery plan.

This report highlights the following key issues and makes recommendations on how these can be addressed:

1. There is a need for a higher frequency of bus services in rural areas

- Whilst we welcome the funding pledged by Government to overhaul bus services, we need to ensure funding for local authorities is ring-fenced, sustainable and long-term, to guarantee a minimum frequency of bus services for towns and rural areas and to enable local authorities to start planning for the future.
- Rural areas should receive an adequate share of the £3billion investment proposed to ensure they receive the support they need. Considerations made to modernise the Bus Services Operator Grant must include additional amounts given to rural areas as well as new incentives for demand responsive transport.

2. Bus services must be responsive to the needs of women

- The Government, local authorities and transport operators must consider the needs and travelling patterns of women in all future transport policy and developments, including Bus Service Improvement Plans, which will need to be published by Local Transport Authorities by October 2021.
- The Government must also do more to ensure women are represented at decision making levels for transport planning, including on forums such as Bus Advisory Boards and through the Transport for Wales Advisory Panels.

3. Bus services need to be better integrated with other transport networks

- The Government must ensure that Bus Service Improvement Plans prioritise the integration of bus services with rail and other transport networks in order to increase the appeal of buses as an alternative to car usage.

4. Investment in more regular bus services is necessary to create a modal shift away from dependency on cars for environmental reasons

- The Government's announcement to invest a further £120 million in zero emission buses is welcome. However, the Government must ensure that this investment is not limited to buses for towns and cities, but also supports services in rural areas that suit the needs of these residents.
- Plans to modernise the Bus Services Operator Grant must include incentives for the take up of zero emission vehicles suitable for meeting the needs of all communities.

1. There is a need for a higher frequency of bus services in rural areas

Currently, bus services in many rural areas are infrequent and unreliable. Out of the 1,436 respondents to our survey who told us they live in a rural area, only 18% said they have access to a frequent, reliable bus service, compared with 50% in non-rural areas.

However, we know that buses provide a lifeline to those in rural areas without ready access to a car, and where access to basic services is only possible through public transport. Our data shows us that the most common reasons for using the bus include accessing basic services (banking, shops etc.) and for social reasons (meeting friends). The survey also included 195 comments from respondents explaining that they had no evening bus services. Crucially, residents in these areas are being denied access to key services and opportunities as a result.

38% of respondents in rural areas said they do not use the bus due to a lack of services, compared with 11% from non-rural areas. A further 15% of those in rural areas said it is their only transport option. Many also commented on the reliability of bus services, with 40% saying their bus is 'sometimes' late. This has had significant consequences; 14% of respondents told us that they had missed an appointment due to unreliable and irregular bus services and many said they have had to pay for a return taxi home.

Furthermore, 44% of respondents in rural areas said that their local bus service had been reduced in the last 3 years. As a result of these changes, 13% said they are now unable to make this journey and 12% said they leave the house less frequently. 46% told us their access to basic services had been negatively impacted, 37% said the same about accessing health services and 41% about social activities. Moreover, 19% of respondents in rural areas said this has negatively impacted their mental health and almost a quarter felt more isolated as a result.

When asked 'what would make you use the bus more', 61% said more services, 43% said a better range of destinations and 40% said timetables that meet my needs. It is clear that long-term sustainable investment in more bus services is needed in order to offset the negative impacts of a reduction in bus services, and to address the declining number of bus passengers.

Whilst the Government's funding commitment of £3 billion to 'level up buses across England', is welcome, the Government must ensure funding for local bus services is ring-fenced, sustainable and long-term, to guarantee a minimum frequency of bus services for towns and rural areas and to enable local authorities to start planning for the future.

Furthermore, rural areas should receive an adequate share of the £3 billion investment proposed to ensure they receive the support they need. Considerations made to modernise the Bus Services Operator Grant, highlighted in the National Bus Strategy for England, must include additional amounts given to rural areas as well as new incentives for demand responsive transport.

46%

told us their access to basic services had been negatively impacted by a reduction in bus services



37%

said their access to health services had been negatively affected by cuts to bus services



19%

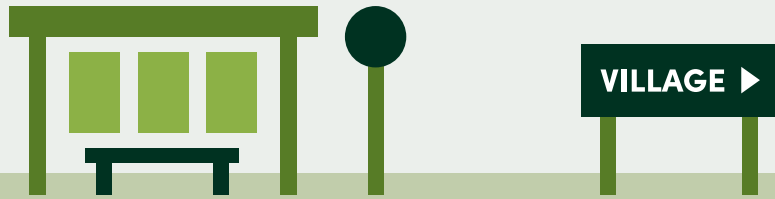
of respondents living in rural areas told us that a reduction in bus services has negatively impacted their mental health



14% of respondents from rural areas told us their nearest bus stop is more than 15 minutes' walk or too far to walk, compared with just 3% of respondents from non-rural areas. Furthermore, over 80 respondents included comments to say they either had no bus stop at all in their village or that their nearest one was 3 or more miles away.

14%

of respondents from rural areas told us their nearest bus stop is more than 15 minutes' walk or too far to walk



I cannot use the bus for an appointment as it is insufficiently reliable & occasionally doesn't come at all."



More frequent buses and one evening bus service would help the whole community. We have not had an evening service for about ten years!"



I consider it vital that more attention be paid to ensuring that villages where there are no services or shops should have some sort of bus provision to prevent isolation and disadvantage to communities."



Our village lost its regular daily bus services some years ago when Cumbria County Council withdrew the subsidises, making the route not viable for the bus company. We now have one per week to the nearest town. This is run by a private bus company. Losing the bus service has been incredibly hard for our community."



2. Bus services must be responsive to the needs of women

Cuts to bus services disproportionately affect women and are linked to gender inequality. The current transport system does not reflect the travelling patterns and needs of women, who are more likely than men to have caregiving duties and be in part-time work, for example, which may require them to take multiple short journeys during the day. Our data shows that 15% of female respondents use the bus for work, education, volunteering or caring responsibilities, and 49% said their local bus service had reduced or stopped altogether in the last 3 years. As a result, 41% said this had negatively impacted their access to the above.

Our evidence also shows that women are hesitant to rely on evening bus services as a result of few and irregular services. When asked how comfortable they would feel using the bus after 5pm, 43% of female respondents said 'not comfortable' or 'very uncomfortable'. This has significantly affected those who work part-time or have caring responsibilities, which often fall outside of the peak 9am-5pm hours. 50% said more bus services would encourage them to use the bus more, and 36% said bus timetables that meet their needs.

Currently, very few women play a central role in the decision making, planning and design stages of transport policy. According to the UK Women's Budget Group, there is a lack of coherency within central and local Government about the gendered impacts of cuts to local bus services. In order to achieve long-term behavioural change, the Government must ensure that Bus Service Improvement Plans, which will need to be published by local transport authorities by October 2021, consider the needs and travelling patterns of women and that consultations on future travel policy encourage women to share their views. Moreover, it is imperative that women are represented at decision making levels for transport planning, including on forums such as Bus Advisory Boards and through the Transport for Wales Advisory Panels.



The bus service presently provided is very irregular with services that do not meet the demands of travelling to and from work or education facilities."



I use the bus to get home from work but my husband drops me off at work in the car; I can't rely on the bus getting me to work because I would be late every day!"



It is not possible for a bus service to get me to different places of work and look after my elderly parents."



In the past I used the bus for work but it became very stressful as they were not very punctual or reliable enough. On occasions they didn't turn up. Timetables altered so the last bus was very early on the return journey. Then they stopped the very limited Sunday service during the winter. I had to change my working situation due to this."

3. Bus services need to be better integrated with other transport networks

Bus services play a vital role in ensuring residents have access to other transport options. 30% of all respondents said they use the bus to access other transport services. However, bus services in rural areas in particular, are not adequately integrated with other transport services. 13% of those living in rural areas said bus services are not integrated with other transport services compared with just 7% from non-rural areas.

Not being able to access further transport services has meant residents are at a higher risk of social exclusion and isolation. As a result of cuts to bus services, and therefore a decrease in the availability of connection to other transport services, 72% of all respondents said this has increased their dependency on using a car, and relying on friends and family.

Furthermore, 17% said a late bus had impacted their connection to other transport services and 28% of all respondents said they would use the bus more frequently if bus services were integrated with other transport services.

It is essential for the Government to ensure that Bus Service Improvement Plans prioritise the integration of bus services with rail and other transport networks in order to increase the appeal of buses as an alternative to car usage.

72%

of all respondents told us that cuts to bus services have increased their dependency on using a car and relying on friends and family



I don't use a bus because it runs so infrequently so I take the car to the train station. The stress of not getting to the station to connect with a train is too great."



Our local bus only runs once per hour and doesn't link up with onward transport without a wait in between."



I live in a rural area where I have to drive for 20 minutes to get to the train station (only 2 buses in weekdays go past station, no buses in afternoons or evenings)."



4. Investment in more regular bus services is necessary to create a modal shift away from dependency on cars for environmental reasons

Bus services play a vital role in reducing congestion and tackling climate change. According to the Campaign for Better Transport, a full double decker bus can take up to 75 cars off the road. In order to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050, a modal shift is required to encourage more people to use public transport and decrease dependency on cars. To do this, investment in more regular bus services as well as investment in low-emission bus fleets is required. As a result of reductions to local bus services, 59% of all respondents said their dependency on travelling by car had increased. We also received many comments from residents in rural areas explaining that, due to a lack of bus services, there are no alternatives to using a car.

50%

of all respondents told us they would use the car less if they had access to a frequent, reliable bus service



An increase in the use of public transport and a reduction in the dependency on cars can also have far-reaching effects on microplastic pollution. According to Friends of the Earth, approximately 69 thousand tonnes of microplastic pollution is caused by tire tread abrasion from traffic. Our data shows that environmental consciousness is shaping travel behaviour, as 51% of all respondents said their main reason for using the bus was environmental.

Furthermore, when asked 'would you use the car less if you had access to a frequent, reliable bus service', 50% of all respondents said 'yes'.

In order to create a modal shift away from the dependency on cars and to achieve long-term behavioural change for environmental reasons, investment in more regular bus services is needed. Whilst the Government's announcement to invest a further £120 million in zero emission buses is welcome, it must ensure that this investment is not limited to buses for towns and cities, but also supports services in rural areas that suit the needs of these residents. Furthermore, plans to modernise the Bus Services Operator Grant must include incentives for the take up of zero emission vehicles suitable for meeting the needs of all communities.



I have to drive 4 miles to get to a bus service."



I use the bus whenever I can to help reduce my eco footprint."



Nearest shops 6 miles, Doctor's 12 miles round trip, nearest large towns 25 miles round trip. Nearest city 66 miles round trip, nearest station 36 miles round trip. No local transport. Hence the necessity to have a car."



I need to drive to get to my nearest bus route."

Conclusion

Infrequent and unreliable bus services in many areas of England and Wales are having a detrimental effect on people's mental health, and increasing feelings of social exclusion and isolation. It's clear that the limitations of the current transport system are also reducing access to employment opportunities, and affecting access to education and health services.

A higher frequency of bus services, in rural areas in particular, is desperately needed. In order to achieve this, long-term, ring-fenced sustainable funding for local bus services is needed to guarantee a minimum frequency of bus services for towns and rural areas and to enable local authorities to start planning for the future.

Whilst the government commitments to improving bus services through the National Bus Strategy for England and the Transport Strategy for Wales is welcome, opportunities to incorporate the travelling patterns and needs of women and of those in rural areas must be considered, for example through the use of Bus Service Improvement plans. Given the highly gendered nature of this issue, it is imperative that the needs of women are considered and that women play a more significant role in the decision-making, planning and design of public transport policy. Examples of how this can be achieved include the use of forums such as Bus Advisory Boards in England and through the Transport for Wales Advisory Panels.

Furthermore, buses provide a lifeline for those looking to use other transport networks such as trains. Whilst the Government has already outlined the importance of integrated transport in the National Bus Strategy for England, it must ensure that Bus Service Improvement Plans prioritise the integration of bus services with rail and other transport networks in order to increase the appeal of buses as an alternative to car usage.

Finally, as the UK and Welsh Government look to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 and reduce harmful microplastic pollution, a commitment to investing in more regular and reliable bus services is imperative in order to achieve long-term behavioural change for environmental reasons. Whilst the Government's announcement to invest a further £120 million in zero emission buses is key, the investment must not be limited to buses for towns and cities, but must also be made available to support services in rural areas that suit the needs of these residents. Finally, plans to modernise the Bus Services Operator Grant must include incentives for the take up of zero emission vehicles suitable for meeting the needs of all communities.



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