

RURAL BUS SERVICES: TECH WILL IMPROVE PATRONAGE



In the third instalment of our deep-dive series on enhancing rural bus services, SYSTRA's Marc Winsland offers his perspective to TransportXtra on why technology is key to making rural journeys easier, more convenient and, importantly, attract more passengers.



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The simple truth about rural bus services is this: they need either more passengers and revenue or more subsidies to survive.

The only way to attract more passengers is to make services easier and more convenient to use. And to do that, transport authorities and operators need to better deploy technology and data analysis.

But while larger operators have the resources to invest and operate technology to improve route planning, ticketing and network analysis, smaller operators may struggle. Transport authorities need to find ways to level the playing field for those smaller operators by pooling resources and finding better ways to work across boundaries. The state of County Buses report conducted by SYSTRA for the County Councils Network (CCN) in 2023 showed that since the global financial crisis of 2007 to 2008, rural bus services have been in decline, with that trend exacerbated by the Covid pandemic. Between 2010 and 2022, there were 44% fewer journeys in rural and county areas, compared to an average decline of 38.5% for the whole of England. Rural bus services are a lifeline for many people. The latest Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs statistics figures show that rural areas are home to a disproportionate proportion of older people, who are more likely to rely on buses, with 25.4% of rural populations aged 65 and older, compared to 17.1% in urban areas. Yet, the 2023 study showed that despite 46% of England's population living in CCN areas, only 15.3% of all bus journeys were taken in those areas in 2021/22.



CUSTOMER FIRST

There is a common theme among cases where technology has increased passenger journeys. A 'customer first' approach which uses technology to remove barriers to people using a service – rather than expecting passengers to work round systems that have been chosen for operational reasons – tends to be more successful.

Ease of buying tickets – or otherwise – can be a barrier to travel on rural services. Some smaller operators still only accept cash, even if they have ticketing systems which could allow contactless payments. This is a deterrent to many passengers, especially those who have a choice in how they travel – and hence would boost usage of services.

Transport authorities can step in to help. For instance, since 2016 Dundee's multi-operator smart cards scheme has supported rural services and helped SME operators thrive. This scheme involves a range of operators, including the main urban bus company, a 'Big Five' company which runs inter-urban routes, and a small independent operator which mostly runs a series of rural routes between villages, towns, and into the city. Although the scheme

encompasses four council areas, the main broker is Dundee City Council, which collects the payments and redistributes them according to journeys with passengers able to source the smartcard from the national or regional operators. All the operators have benefited from more passengers.

Another vital requirement for passengers is the ability to plan their routes. Again, while larger operators will almost certainly offer this through an app, smaller operators may not. There are cost effective options such as Passenger's myTrip app, which has been designed to be affordable. Smaller operators should also be encouraged to publicise the not-for-profit Traveline – currently undergoing an upgrade - which aggregates information from multiple operators for the travelling public. One point to note, however, is that – like Google – it relies on operators keeping their timetable information files up to date. Transport authorities may consider supporting smaller operators with this type of data maintenance.

Tech use is no longer quite the stark divide that it used to be - today's pensioners were middle-aged when smartphones were first introduced. That said, there will still be those who struggle with technology, and these will tend to be older people, however operators can still provide real-time information displays in town and village centres as well as e-paper timetable displays at bus stops which can be kept up-to-date remotely.



DEMAND RESPONSIVE TRAVEL

Demand-responsive transport (DRT) is often floated as an alternative to fixed line services in rural areas. However, many DRT schemes have failed because the level of subsidy required has been unsustainable.

Success stories can be found where a more creative approach has been deployed. For instance, in Milton Keynes Arriva collected data from a DRT network to create fixed routes which connect the right locations at the right times, launching a new orbital service, The Loop, in January this year.

Forward-thinking transport authorities will need to be creative if they are to offer practical solutions for low density areas; these solutions may not necessarily mean providing additional bus services. Instead, solutions may be found through working directly with their peers in other policy areas like health, social services and education to support communities with the right activities in the right venues at the right time. In Scotland, Ember bus services run between cities but stop at villages along the way, on demand. Passengers can book tickets 10 minutes or more before a bus reaches their stop – via their website or call centre - with the location of buses shown on a live map on Ember’s website. Ember’s success is demonstrated by its expanding network, with its latest new service from Edinburgh to Fort William launched in April 2025.

Both these cases demonstrate the power of digitalisation and of data. In fact, Ember has been built from the technology up. However, smaller companies will rarely have the technology, in-house skills or resource to collect and analyse data to help them deliver a service which is better suited to passenger needs in their area.

Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIP) typically call for better deployment of digital tools and technologies. Transport authorities need to find a way to step in and assist their smaller operators if they are to meet their own goals.



Marc Winsland and colleagues from SYSTRA's Bus Team will be sharing their expertise, analysis, and insight on delivering better bus services across the UK in upcoming editions of TransportXtra.



Look out for Marc's next in-depth article, landing May 2025. In the meantime, you can explore more of their work here: www.systra.com/uk/markets/transport/bus/

Deployment of digitalisation

There are some good examples of neighbouring transport authorities banding together to share the skills and resources needed to deploy digitalisation. For instance, in Strathclyde 12 councils collaborate as one transport authority with the entire range of rural and urban services brought under one umbrella. This model could work equally well for counties such as Leicestershire, where the city of Leicester is operated as an island – as Telford is within Shropshire.

To rescue rural networks from the brink of extinction, greater collaboration is essential. Authorities must embrace digitalisation, innovation, and technology—not as optional extras, but as necessities. Without this shift, the downward trends of the past decade will only persist.





Find out how SYSTRA can assist you in Demand Responsive Transport:

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