

Future of Transport: Rural Strategy Call for Evidence

**West Yorkshire Combined Authority
Response**

February 2021

A decorative graphic consisting of two overlapping, curved teal shapes that sweep across the bottom right corner of the page. The top curve is a darker shade of teal, while the bottom curve is a lighter shade, creating a layered effect.

West Yorkshire

With a population of two million, West Yorkshire is a diverse, polycentric region made up of major cities, towns and rural areas which all have distinctive economic roles and priorities. In 2019, 9% of the population of West Yorkshire lived in areas classified as rural (DEFRA Rural Classification).

Despite our many strengths West Yorkshire has some challenges, with 22% of people living in areas defined as being among the most deprived 10% nationally. Many of the most deprived areas are urban in nature but rural poverty is also an issue in West Yorkshire. Additionally, as the population has increased, transport congestion at peak times, access to services and air quality have become major constraints on inclusive growth.

Our region has four priorities: enabling inclusive growth; boosting productivity; delivering 21st century transport; and enabling clean growth including being net zero-carbon by 2038.

Issues facing rural areas

Dependence on private car use

In West Yorkshire, 83% of rural households have access to at least 1 car, with 42% having access to more than 1 vehicle (Census 2011). Declining revenue budgets for all local transport authorities have exasperated private vehicle reliance in some rural areas as a necessary means to access employment and key services.

Additionally, car dependency in rural areas can make these areas less attractive to younger people which recent evidence indicates are less likely to drive less. Around 21% of the population of rural areas in West Yorkshire are over 65 (6% higher than urban areas in West Yorkshire) (ONS, 2019). Fewer young people and fewer families can result in less demand to support local services such as schools and nurseries as well as intensify the decline of local highstreets.

Providing attractive links to and from nearby centres, and safe, attractive ways of getting around and between villages and local areas can help reverse this, supporting access to services and reinvigorating local rural economies and communities. Given the potentially longer travel distances and more challenging topography found in some rural areas in West Yorkshire, innovations such as electric bikes hire schemes, electric bike charging points and car club access can be key to ensuring active travel take up by the wider rural population.

Rural Bus Services

There has been a continued decline in commercial rural bus services. This is due to a number of factors, including a greater focus on urban operations by commercial bus operators, land use planning favouring car-based development, and inconsistencies in securing developer funding (S106). The Combined Authority look to support and invest in rural bus services through our tendered service budget. These bus services provide

affordable, inclusive and accessible transport providing connectivity to education, healthcare, retail, leisure and work opportunities.

Feedback from stakeholders and customers shows demand to provide more rural bus services and ensure that these are affordable. Sustainable revenue funding is a key issue. Many transport authorities are in a position of having to plan for the delivery of transport services over the coming five years in an environment of declining revenue budgets. A challenge with funding and the way it is administered is that it does not fully consider the social and economic value these bus services provide.

The Combined Authority trust that sustainable revenue funding for rural bus services will be considered and addressed in the planned future Department for Transport National Bus Strategy so that investment can be made to maintain and enhance rural bus services in our region. It is also vital to ensure that we can support decarbonisation, air quality and climate change priorities. Therefore, we would welcome ring fenced dedicated revenue funding for rural bus services, and capital funding to enable rural bus fleets to be upgraded.

Opportunities exist to adopt more Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) and flexible bus services using app-based technology, however mobile phone and internet connectivity is also a challenge in rural areas (covered below).

Access to key services and employment

In West Yorkshire, 33% of rural areas are in the most deprived 20% of the geographic barriers decile, looking at road distance to a post office, primary school, supermarket and a GP surgery (IMD). Work undertaken for the emerging West Yorkshire Connectivity Plan found that in some more remote areas of West Yorkshire, warehousing and distribution work are key employment areas for residents. This work is often at unsociable hours in industrial estates with poor public transport access. With 17% of rural households having no access to a car, barriers to employment are a significant issue faced by some in rural communities. More flexible and on demand transport solutions such as bikes hire schemes, car club access and DRT can help more remote communities access key services and employment opportunities.

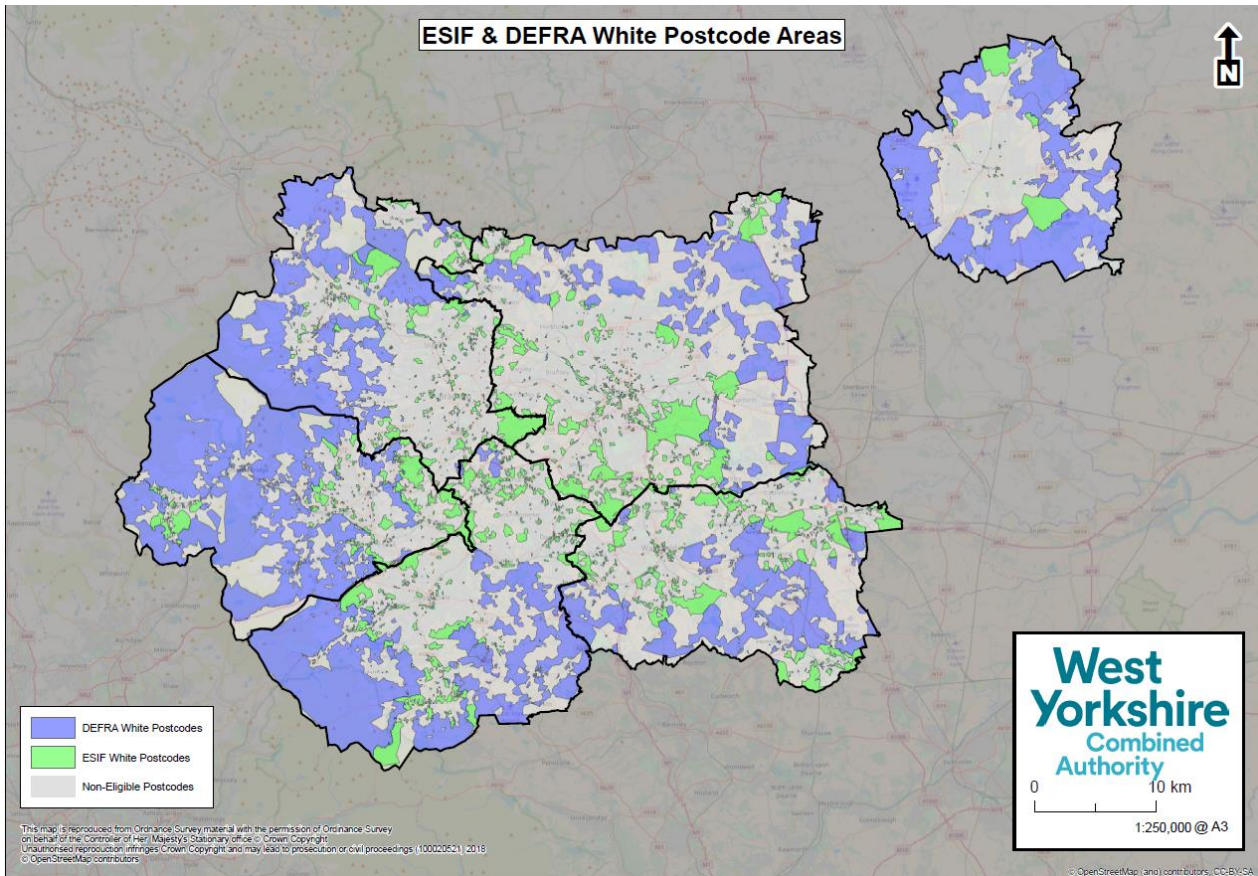
Rail is also an integral part of rural transport, particularly for accessing employment. It can also play a critical part in transporting children to school (Honley Station in the Holme Valley is a good example of this). Good integration of transport services is important to ensuring efficiencies and good customer experience. Many rural rail stations provide a good opportunity to combine transport services in the form of mobility hubs, providing interchange opportunities and first / last mile connectivity.

Digital connectivity

The UK's digital infrastructure must be able to support this rapid increase in traffic, providing coverage with sufficient capacity to ensure data can flow at the volume, speed and reliability required to meet the demands of modern life. Broadband and mobile connectivity must be treated as the fourth utility, with everyone benefiting from improved connectivity. This will play a crucial role in ensuring that everyone, wherever they live and however they connect, can make full use of digital services and benefit from participation in the digital economy.

The Combined Authority (and West Yorkshire and York council partners) have been working collectively on the Superfast West Yorkshire and York Programme. The programme is supported by Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and local resources. Our programme operates in areas of market failure, which through a market review process, are identified as being unlikely to receive investment commercially before 2025.

This is predominately in the region's rural areas. This is illustrated by the figure below which shows post code areas across West Yorkshire and York which do not currently have superfast broadband coverage¹.



The programme, alongside commercial investment, is pushing the region closer towards 100% superfast (30Mbps¹) coverage in our communities by targeting hard to reach and/or rural areas. Nationally superfast coverage is currently 96.64%, with West Yorkshire superfast coverage at 97.89%².

The Combined Authority and partners are already thinking about future digital requirements and are delivering 'future-proofed' broadband infrastructure – we moved from delivering superfast speeds to delivering gigabit capable (1 Gigabit per second) infrastructure across phases two and three of our programme which are currently in delivery. This is delivered by either Fibre to the Premises (FTTP) or a mix of fibre and gigabit capable wireless technology. This type of infrastructure is critical in providing for the future requirements of home broadband and robust 4G and 5G mobile connectivity

¹ Rural areas without coverage (blue) and urban areas without coverage (green).

² Source: www.Thinkbroadband.com

which generally requires a fibre connection (referred to as 'backhaul') from each mobile mast.

Coverage of gigabit capable infrastructure is far behind superfast speeds, with 58.2% coverage across West Yorkshire (compared to 37.02% nationally) with areas of coverage generally being focused in cities, towns and other urban areas. Rural areas predominately fall behind when new types of digital infrastructure are rolled out and require significant amounts of public subsidy in order to stimulate commercial activity. This can leave rural areas digitally excluded and lacking the essential infrastructure to support mobility solutions.

Developments in innovation for rural transport

Community Rail Partnerships

Community Rail Partnerships can play an important role in supporting local community interaction with rail and other public transport, particularly in rural areas. In West Yorkshire there is a strong history of effective Community Rail Partnerships supporting and enhancing local railways and station facilities.

An example is the work local Community Rail Partnership carries out with a charity SELFA which works with young people and children in the Skipton/Craven area. The project supports them to take the train into Leeds to help practice their independence and social skills, and build on their self-esteem and confidence. The young people also give feedback on what could have made their journey easier, which can be used for training and audits of rural public transport access.

Similarly, the Penistone Line Partnership is a voluntary organisation which supports and promotes community involvement along the Huddersfield to Sheffield railway line. The Penistone Line Partnership draws together train operator Northern, Network Rail, local authorities and users to raise awareness of the railway in the local community, promote and market it more effectively, develop ideas and arrange funding for local improvements.

Public Transport Service Integration

Good public transport service integration is particularly important in rural areas to reduce reliance on private car use, improve access to employment and key services, and ensure a good customer experience.

In Hebden Bridge, around a quarter of households in Hebden Bridge do not have access to a car, significantly higher than most market towns and their rural hinterlands. The town has a subsidised minibuses network centred on the rail station which also links the surrounding hillside settlements with the town, alongside a regular commercial bus service to neighbouring towns. In response to poor customer satisfaction feedback, service improvements were instigated in the area to improve frequency and reliability after public consultation, with additional buses added for fixed periods to assess the impact on patronage. In addition, efficiencies were gained through better co-ordination with other funded services and minibuses were timed to provide better interchange with rail services. Patronage levels and customer satisfaction with bus services within Hebden Bridge significantly improved as a result of the project (between March 2013 and March 2016 patronage on the minibuses network alone increased by 40%).

The resurgence of the bus service in Hebden Bridge illustrates how, by consulting with bus residents and working closely with bus operators, a local transport authority can enable an efficient and effective bus service.

Rural Bus Services

The Combined Authority work in partnership with Holme Valley Parish Council (who part fund services) to provide a network of four buses in the local area. These buses provide a number of services linking rural communities with Holmfirth Centre where connections can be made for onward travel. This partnership approach has enabled the Combined Authority to successfully serve the community's needs, and regular feedback helps to continuously review services and react to the ever-changing customer demands.

In Marsden, the Combined Authority support a bus service which is operated by South Pennine Community Transport. This service provides a number of rural communities which would otherwise be isolated with access to Marsden and Slaithwaite centres.

By working with the Community Transport operator who is involved in the local area, we have been able to develop the service over the years to best serve the communities' needs. The service is now greatly valued by residents in the local area.

First last mile freight

The rise of home deliveries effects rural as well as urban areas, and the need for sustainable first / last mile delivery solutions is just as pronounced.

Cargodale is a local eCargo bike delivery service based on Hebden Bridge in Calderdale, West Yorkshire. Set up in 2020, the company employs 9 riders and delivers goods from a range of local independent businesses across Todmorden, Hebden Bridge and Halifax. The company is a community interest company, with any surplus reinvested rather than paid as profit/dividends. Website: <https://www.cargodale.co.uk/>.

Community Car Club

Rural areas offer opportunities for community car clubs with the support of the local community. An example in West Yorkshire is Hour Car, a rural car share scheme which has been operating in the upper Calder Valley for over 14 years. Hour Car, which has 5 vehicles and 60 members, is a co-operative owned by its members and is designed to provide a local alternative to car ownership. Website: <http://www.hourcar.co.uk/>.

Active Travel Routes

Providing attractive links to/from local centres, and safe, attractive ways of getting around and between villages and local areas can help to support access to jobs and services and reinvigorating local rural economies and communities.

The Castleford – Wakefield Greenway is a traffic free cycle route completed in 2020. The new infrastructure enables walking and cycling trips through rural areas between Castleford and Wakefield, providing alternative travel options to private car use, particularly as some of these areas currently have less regular public transport services. The route also increases the range residentials from these areas can travel to rail or bus link. The route has seen an increase in use since opening of 102% based on the same period in the previous year.

Department for Transport: Our approach

Through the development of the West Yorkshire Future Mobility Strategy, West Yorkshire Combined Authority held a series of stakeholder workshops which included representatives from our partner councils alongside transport operators, academics, technology and solution providers and local advocacy groups. These workshop sessions included a review of the Department for Transport's Future of Transport Urban principles to consider how they could be extended or modified to meet the needs of rural areas as well as those of our towns and cities. The following were highlighted as considerations required to support rural needs:

- **Mobility innovation needs to also help to solve more rural specific challenges:** the principles currently focus on common urban themes, but rural challenges are arguable more difficult to tackle. For example, social isolation is a key challenge in many rural communities with reduction of commercial public transport services. However, with limited demand to support services, poorer data connectivity, and more limited trials of mobility innovation, developing new mobility solutions and services to tackle connectivity issues, particularly for those without access to cars, is very challenging as commercial providers are reluctant to invest and limited funding is available for local authority led trials. New mobility services should support inclusive growth ambitions, improving access to jobs, training, and community services.
- **The benefits of innovation in mobility must be available to all societal groups:** although geographic inclusivity is important in the future of transport innovation (as per the current principles), inclusivity of access by all groups in society is vital if all are to be able to experience the benefits of such developments and none are left behind. The benefits of innovation in mobility must be available across society, including those who have limited access to technology. This is particularly important in rural areas, where data connectivity can be poor and opportunities to access alternatives are limited.
- **Walking, cycling and active travel:** The current urban principles state that active travel must remain the best options for short journeys. However, in rural environments active travel is not always possible given the limitations of existing rural infrastructure. Currently, safe walking and cycling infrastructure in many rural areas is extremely limited due to years of motor dominance. Separate infrastructure linking villages (as seen in the Netherlands) is needed to enabling modal shift and improving health and connectivity outcomes. However, this may need special consideration to ensure investment given current low cycling numbers in rural areas do not support the development of positive business cases.
- **Commercial opportunities:** The current principles do not recognise the more challenging commercial environment for transport innovation in rural environments. Concerns about potential demand to support services, poorer data connectivity, and limited trials of mobility innovation do not lend themselves to confidence in the marketplace by private investors or support strong business case development.

- **Innovation should improve customer experience:** With heavy reliance on car use in rural communities, innovation and new mobility services will only succeed if the overall experience is beneficial to users and help to support modal shift away from private car reliance. New mobility services should seek to improve affordability, ease of access and user experience of travel.

Encouraging transport innovation in rural areas

Funding opportunities and support

National government innovation funding should be targeted towards helping companies and local authorities to develop and test out innovative approaches to existing problems, many of which we cannot currently make the commercial case for trialling. This is particularly the case in rural areas where limited demand to support services and more limited trials of mobility innovation is very challenging as commercial providers are reluctant to invest and limited funding is available for local authority led trials. Developing rural trials will help to create an evidence base for future services and create both public and private sector confidence in rural service innovation going forward.

Such trials and pilots should be led locally in response to local need, with significant consideration of local context, service integration and community engagement. However, support and guidance should be offered nationally facilitate effective delivery, and enable best practice sharing between authorities.

Improved data connectivity

The coverage and availability of gigabit capable broadband and quality mobile connectivity (4G and 5G) still requires significant development in rural areas. We welcome the work from by the Government (particularly by DCMS) to support digital connectivity in rural areas. This has enabled rural communities to have access to robust gigabit capable broadband connectivity which provides the backhaul for the vast majority of 4G and 5G mobile services.

However, it is clear that more work is needed. We note that the recently announced funding for the Outside In Programme being developed by DCMS will not deliver gigabit broadband to all rural areas. It will only target c.5% of rural areas, with the remaining 15% of rural areas that will not receive commercial investment by 2025 being left in an unclear position.

We would emphasise the need for more government investment in this programme and mobile connectivity (4G and 5G) in rural areas to enable current and emerging transport innovations to operate successfully and integrate with existing traffic systems, ensuring rural areas are not left behind.

Legislation

Where legislation fails to keep pace with the scale and rate of change for a particular sector, there can be significant knock-on effects for wider public policy priorities like public safety, public health, congestion or inclusive growth.

There is a lack of flexibility in existing legislation, causing difficulties in responding to new transport services. Government should allow for greater flexibility around by-laws and highways powers so that innovative vehicles and services can be trialled more easily, and transport authorities can strike a balance between safety, the quality of the public realm, innovation, and consumer benefits in relation to rapidly emerging trends.

Inclusivity

There needs to be a recognition that in future, transport users without access to smartphones or other digital technology may be financially penalised by not being able to access the cheapest transport and fares via an app or online. This could be even more pronounced in rural areas where travel distances to access employment, education and key services can be longer. There is a risk that some parts of society that do not have access to Wi-Fi and contactless bank cards may be left behind in the development of new technology. The Government needs to ensure that wherever possible, funding opportunities are associated with the development of inclusive technologies and not just the development of technology that will benefit a minority of the population. In particular, user groups including vulnerable and elderly need to be protected by ensuring transport providers deliver benefits for all.

There is limited guidance or best practice on how to plan transport networks in rural areas for young people, the elderly and mobility impaired in mind. In particular, the DfT should ensure that the level of risk posed to the mobility impaired, pedestrians and cyclists by new mobility services and innovation is minimised.

Infrastructure

Funding for supporting infrastructure in rural areas is required to enable developments in mobility services and support innovation. With smaller populations, demand estimates can be an inhibiting factor to developing positive business cases for infrastructure investment. This includes investment in wider footways linking bus and rail hubs, or cycle lanes linking villages also provides a safe space for e-scooters and access to other modes. Additionally, services such as a mobility hub in a village, combined with an individual e-bike to access it, can enable a large range of isolated house to access a range of transport services, even in challenging topographies. Support from the national level is required to enable such investment.

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