



The  
countryside  
charity

February 2020

# Transport deserts

Why reconnecting rural England matters





## The state of public transport in England's small towns

---

Small towns and their surrounding villages are the beating heart of England's countryside. Across the country there are more than a thousand small towns, which are home to at least 15 million people. Close to a further eight million people live in villages.<sup>1</sup>

In many people's imaginations, the quintessential English community is still a rural village surrounded by a green landscape. Yet, despite the fact that the public continues to treasure our rural landscapes, the focus of policy makers is all too often elsewhere. For too long decision makers have rarely considered the needs of communities living in the countryside. Nowhere is this clearer than in the current state of transport policy.

Over a number of decades, villages and small towns have become increasingly cut off from public transport. Thousands of communities lost their links to the national railway network during the Beeching cuts of the 1960s, but at the time it was promised that any rail route lost to station closures would be replaced by bus services.

However, since the deregulation of bus services in the 1980s, routes that do not serve communities with a large enough population to ensure commercial viability have been hard to support. More recently the impact of cuts to local authority budgets has meant that many councils have reduced or wholly withdrawn their financial support for bus routes serving rural communities.

### Context:

- A small town is a settlement with 5000 – 30,000 residents.
- A transport desert exists where the choices and opportunities available to a community are limited by a lack of public transport.<sup>2</sup>
- Across England, local authority spending on buses is down by 43% over the past nine years.
- Over 3000 bus routes have been withdrawn, reduced, or altered over the same period.<sup>3</sup>
- It currently takes residents of small towns 54% longer to reach their GP surgery by public transport compared with people living in larger settlements.<sup>4</sup>

### Acknowledgements:

Summary by Christopher Hinchliff.

Based on the '*Transport Deserts*' report commissioned by CPRE, the countryside charity, from the Campaign for Better Transport. Published 12 February 2020.

Original report by Andrew Allen.





## Key findings

---

New research commissioned by CPRE, the countryside charity has shown that we have now reached a point where more than half of small towns are either already functionally a ‘transport desert’ or are at risk of becoming one.<sup>5</sup> This means that residents in many rural communities are being severely limited in their ability to connect with friends and family, benefit from employment and education, and access shops, services and other facilities.

It does not have to be this way. As this research shows, rural areas that have been able to maintain good rail links and have invested in their bus network continue to enjoy excellent connectivity. Building on *Transport Deserts*, CPRE will be campaigning for a raft of policies that will reverse the growth of transport deserts across the countryside, and will help deliver thriving and sustainable rural communities for all members of society.

### Top stats:

- Across the north east and south west of England, 56% of small towns have become transport deserts or are at risk of becoming one.
- Approximately 200,000 people living in small towns in these areas have access to just one commuter bus per hour at peak times for their whole community.
- Two-thirds of small towns across the north east and south west of England have no train station connecting them to the national rail network.







## The research method

---

This new research on rural transport deserts has been commissioned by CPRE, the countryside charity and carried out by the Campaign for Better Transport.

The *Transport Deserts* report is the first attempt to apply a consistent method for ranking the availability of public transport in small rural towns. Using data to assess the availability and regularity of bus, rail and other transport services to a nearby major settlement, each town has been allocated a score. These scores allow us to see which towns are severely lacking public transport options, which have limited and likely insufficient services, and which are well connected.

In this first report, the south west and north east of England have been taken as case studies, with 162 small towns across the two regions investigated.







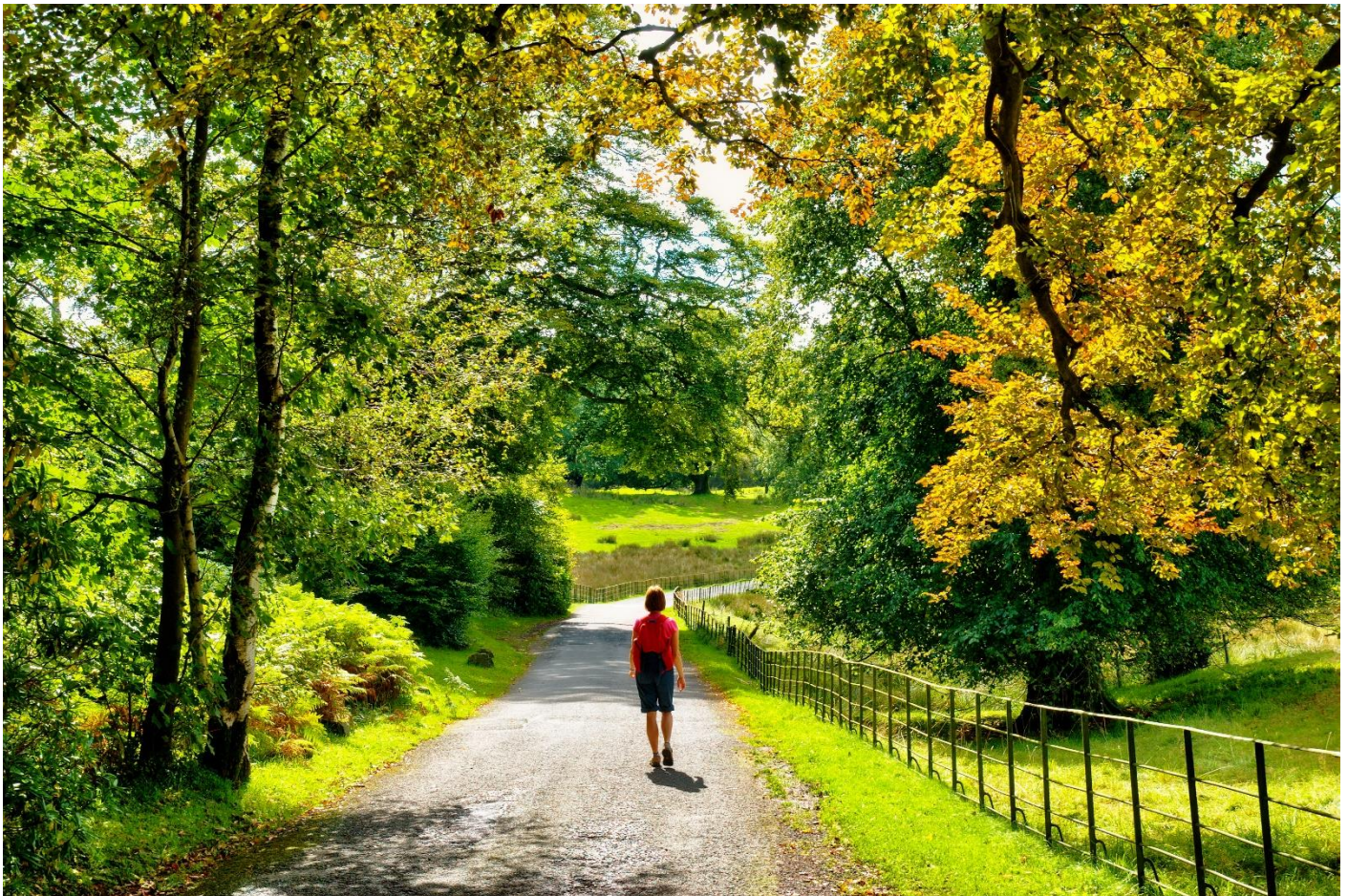
## The social impact of rural transport deserts

---

The combination of lost rail and bus services is a real threat to rural communities, and transport deserts are making life in the countryside less sustainable in numerous ways.

Older people living in the countryside are often reliant on public transport to reach vital services such as GPs and libraries. The loss of a bus route can make local services unsustainable while making rural life incredibly difficult as people grow older. Similarly, subsidised buses are essential for allowing younger people to stay connected and reach schools and colleges. Transport deserts can force younger people living in villages to move to larger cities. Ensuring that every part of the countryside is well served by public transport is essential for supporting diverse rural communities and promoting social cohesion.

For those who cannot afford to own or run a car, living in a transport desert can mean going to work is almost impossible, while accessing benefits can mean walking for miles on unsafe roads. This can lead to a situation where the countryside is at risk of becoming somewhere where only the well-off can afford to live. Having affordable and reliable rural transport is vital for ensuring that our treasured countryside is somewhere anyone can call home.







## The environmental impact of rural transport deserts

---

Less public transport means more cars on rural roads. The reliance on private driving to travel in the countryside is seriously bad news for the planet. Transport now causes more carbon dioxide pollution than any other sector, accounting for 33% of all carbon emissions, and without proper alternatives we cannot begin to seriously act on global warming.<sup>6</sup> Better rural public transport is the best way to keep cars off the road and carbon out of the atmosphere.

With a better public transport system we could see local shops and high streets regenerate as people become less reliant on online shopping, thereby also reducing emissions from delivery vehicles.

A full double decker bus can take up to 75 cars off the road and produces ten times less nitrogen oxide pollution per passenger than a comparable journey by a diesel car.<sup>7</sup> This means that the car traffic caused by transport deserts across the countryside is not only undermining the tranquility of rural life and reducing many people's ability to get into the great outdoors, but is also contributing to extremely harmful air pollution. If more journeys in rural England were made by public transport there would be a significant reduction in the air pollution which results in 40,000 deaths and costs the economy £20 billion every year.<sup>8</sup>

More public transport in rural areas also has a huge role to play in reducing the microplastics entering England's waterways, since tire tread abrasion from traffic across the country produces approximately 68,000 tonnes of microplastic pollution every year.<sup>9</sup>

Better yet, a network of bus routes providing access to key services for smaller rural settlements would ensure that people of all ages and backgrounds can continue to live in the countryside, meaning that they are more connected to nature and the environment, and more likely to take action to protect it.





## Rural public transport in the south west

---

Across the south west this report shows evidence of very poor provision of public transport for small towns, and the picture for surrounding villages is likely to be even worse. The proportion of towns that have become transport deserts or are at risk of becoming one in each county in the south west is as follows:

- 10 out of 15 towns in Wiltshire
- 14 out of 23 towns in Somerset
- 14 out of 16 towns in Gloucestershire
- 10 out of 14 towns in Dorset
- 17 out of 25 towns in Devon
- 8 out of 17 towns in Cornwall<sup>10</sup>

While small towns across the south west are often suffering from a lack of public transport, this research shows that this does not need to be the case, and that action can be taken. A relatively high proportion of small Cornish towns retain reasonable public transport links because the county has retained a larger number of railway stations, and because Cornwall increased its spending on buses by 18% between 2009/10 and 2018/19.

The contrast with Dorset is stark. Dorset County Council has cut spending on buses by 80% over the past nine years and now faces a crisis in connectivity across its small towns.<sup>11</sup> There is no predetermined reason why rural communities in Dorset should lack the public transport enjoyed by counterparts in Cornwall. The evidence is clear that better rail connections and higher spending can deliver good public transport opportunities for small towns. These services are then likely to support better connections for villages.





## Rural public transport in the north east

---

Although small towns in the north east fare somewhat better than the south west, the research highlights that even in a traditionally urbanised region smaller rural communities are too often lacking in adequate public transport provision.

The proportion of towns that have become transport deserts or are at risk of becoming one in each county in the north east is as follows:

- 4 out of 11 towns in Tyne and Wear
- 2 out of 5 towns in Redcar and Cleveland
- 6 out of 12 towns in Northumberland
- 8 out of 22 towns in County Durham<sup>12</sup>

For as long as towns like Ponteland, with over 10,000 residents, are served by just two or three commuter buses an hour, it is highly likely that residents who are unable to drive as an alternative will struggle to access services and facilities.

The lack of bus and rail services for sizeable rural towns further emphasises the fact that thousands of villages across the country are now left with no regular public transport at all.







## Solutions

---

There is a clear need for immediate action to tackle transport deserts, and there is no escaping from the fact that this means that we will have to invest more money in supporting public transport in rural areas.

That is why CPRE, the countryside charity is calling for:

1. A national bus strategy that sets out a clear and ambitious target for the proportion of people living within walking distance of a regularly served bus stop, as well as addressing flaws in existing policies such as the inadequate concessionary fare reimbursement rates that currently undermine rural services.
2. The introduction of a new Rural Transport Fund set up in the following way:
  - 2.1. A guaranteed multi-year investment in rural transport specifically allocated to local authorities to spend on supporting public transport provision for rural communities that currently need better connections.
  - 2.2. Allocated on the basis of the proportion of a local authorities' population living in rural areas and small hub towns.
  - 2.3. Available for both revenue and capital spending so that the money can either be used for investing in local infrastructure, or subsidising new or expanded services such as bus routes.
  - 2.4. Not linked to one specific mode of transport provision so that local authorities are able to choose solutions that work best for their communities and trial innovative models such as demand responsive transport, and mobility as a service.
3. An ambitious national programme of rail re-openings funded by national government, restoring branch passenger services to small towns in rural areas.





## Conclusions

---

The continued growth of transport deserts in rural England is not an inevitability. The experience of similar areas in several European countries shows that the right policies can support excellent connectivity even for small towns and villages.<sup>13</sup>

However, as the research we have commissioned shows, transport deserts in our countryside are already dangerously widespread, and are undermining the environmental, social, and economic sustainability of our rural communities.

Even where public transport services are wholly subsidised, introducing new connections for rural communities is inexpensive compared with other transport expenditure, and relatively modest investments in rural transport could deliver transformative results.

Additional government spending in rural transport won't be a panacea. We will still need to see policies, such as new concessionary fares for younger people, to ensure that public transport is the most affordable way to travel in rural areas. There is also a need for longer term reforms to better integrate different modes so that people can seamlessly and conveniently use a combination of walking and cycling, buses, and rail. However, the first step to putting an end to rural transport deserts is delivering more public transport services across all of rural England and that means investing in expanding transport provision now.







## References

---

- <sup>1</sup> Centre for Towns. The ageing of our towns. 2020. <https://www.centrefortowns.org/reports/the-ageing-of-our-towns/viewdocument> [Accessed 16 January 2020]
- <sup>2</sup> Campaign for Better Transport. Transport deserts. 2020
- <sup>3</sup> Campaign for Better Transport. Buses in crisis: A report on bus funding across England and Wales 2010 – 2018. 2018. <https://bettertransport.org.uk/sites/default/files/research-files/19.04.12.bic-2018.pdf> [Accessed 16 January 2020]
- <sup>4</sup> Department for Transport. Journey time statistics: data tables. 2019. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/journey-time-statistics-data-tables-jts> [Accessed 16 January 2020]
- <sup>5</sup> Campaign for Better Transport. Transport deserts. 2020
- <sup>6</sup> Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy. 2018 Greenhouse gas emissions, provisional figures. 2019. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/790626/2018-provisional-emissions-statistics-report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/790626/2018-provisional-emissions-statistics-report.pdf) [Accessed 24 January 2020]
- <sup>7</sup> Greener Journeys. Tackling pollution and congestion. 2017. <https://greenerjourneys.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/TACKLING-POLLUTION-AND-CONGESTION-15-JUNE-2017-FINAL.pdf> [Accessed 28 January 2020]
- <sup>8</sup> Royal College of Physicians. Every breath we take: the lifelong impact of air pollution. 2016. [file:///C:/Users/ChrisH/AppData/Local/Packages/Microsoft.MicrosoftEdge\\_8wekyb3d8bbwe/TempState/Downloads/Air pollution main%20report WEB 1 0 0%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/ChrisH/AppData/Local/Packages/Microsoft.MicrosoftEdge_8wekyb3d8bbwe/TempState/Downloads/Air%20pollution%20main%20report%20WEB%201%200%20(1).pdf) [Accessed 28 January 2020]
- <sup>9</sup> Eunomia. Reducing household contributions to marine plastic pollution. 2018. [https://cdn.friendsoftheearth.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/reducing-household-plastics\\_0.pdf](https://cdn.friendsoftheearth.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/reducing-household-plastics_0.pdf) [Accessed 28 January 2020]
- <sup>10</sup> Campaign for Better Transport. Transport deserts. 2020
- <sup>11</sup> Campaign for Better Transport. Buses in crisis: A report on bus funding across England and Wales 2010 – 2018. 2018. <https://bettertransport.org.uk/sites/default/files/research-files/19.04.12.bic-2018.pdf> [Accessed 16 January 2020]
- <sup>12</sup> Campaign for Better Transport. Transport deserts. 2020
- <sup>13</sup> Foundation for Integrated Transport. Shropshire Rural Buses. 2018. <http://integratedtransport.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/FIT-Shropshire-Buses-Report-web.pdf> [Accessed 16 January 2020]





The  
countryside  
charity

## Photo credits

---

Front cover. Copyright CPRE

Page 3. Bill Waters

Page 4. Colin Underhill/ Alamy

Page 5. Shutterstock

Page 6. Shutterstock

Page 7. Bill Waters

Page 8. Marytn Williams/ Alamy

Page 9. Copyright CPRE

Page 10. Alamy

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.

© Campaign to Protect Rural England, 5-11 Lavington Street, London, SE1 0NZ | Tel: 020 7981 2800 |  
Email: [info@cpre.org.uk](mailto:info@cpre.org.uk) | [www.cpre.org.uk](http://www.cpre.org.uk)

CPRE is the trading name of Campaign To Protect Rural England  
A company limited by guarantee.  
Registered in England number: 4302973  
Registered Charity number: 1089685