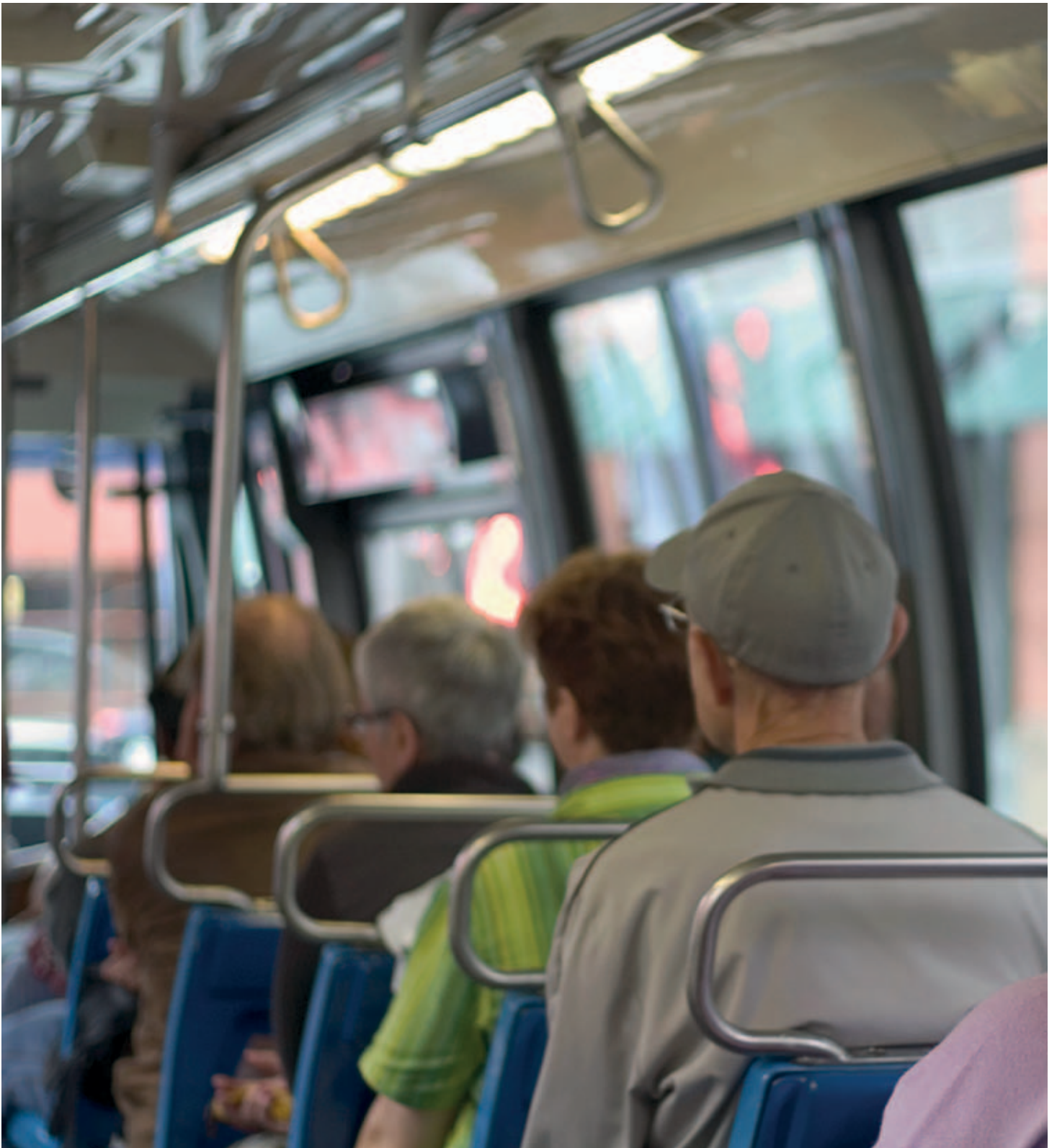


Missed opportunities: the impact on older people of cuts to rural bus services



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Introduction

Bus services provide a lifeline for many older people. For those without easy access to a car, having accessible and affordable public transport is vital to leading an active and independent life.

The national bus concession means people in later life are able to reach key services and friends and family, without making difficult financial choices. The concession allows older people to travel off-peak on buses anywhere in England for free. Eligibility is currently tied to State Pension age for both men and women. It is a crucial universal benefit that is greatly valued by older people.

But there is no point in having a bus concession without a bus to get on. Having bus services that are both free and readily available go hand in hand. Over the last year there have been significant funding cuts to bus services, which seriously affect the convenience of bus travel for older people.

The most recent report from the Campaign for Better Transport showed that 41 per cent of local authorities had made cuts in the current financial year (2012/13); the total estimate for cuts in 2011/2012 was £36 million.

There have always been inequalities in access to reliable bus services, but there is evidence that the situation is getting worse. In many cases buses are being cut without suitable alternatives, which will leave older people stranded. This is about more than getting from A to B. The wider benefits of bus travel and its role in improving people's quality of life need to be recognised in all transport policy.

In one of the areas examined in this report, Northamptonshire, the Campaign for Better Transport found that the local transport authorities reported that they would be cutting funding in 2012/13, compared to 2011/12, by 29 per cent.

The 2012 Autumn Statement announced further cuts to local authority budgets of 2 per cent in 2014/15 and the Passenger Transport Executive Group has warned that the growth of expenditure on the statutory concessionary fares scheme for older people and those with disabilities could lead to cuts of 75 per cent in other transport budgets in the absence of sufficient central government funding for the scheme.





About the research

As part of Age UK's work assessing the impact of cuts to bus services in rural areas, Opinion Leader conducted 16 in-depth interviews with people aged 65+ who lived in rural areas and who used bus services as their main source of travel. Fifteen of these interviews were conducted in the participant's home; one was conducted by telephone. Six case studies were created from these interviews and can be found in the second section of this report (page 13). In addition, four of the interviews were filmed, in order to put together a two-and-a-half minute video, which is available on our website.

Participants were deliberately selected to include people aged 65 or over who had been affected by recent cuts to their rural bus services. The sample included male and female participants; approximately half were aged 75 or over and the majority had difficulty with mobility or a sensory disability. All interviews took place in rural parts of Durham or Northampton, which were chosen as areas that had recently been subject to cuts to bus services. This summary report draws together the main findings from these interviews.

Changes to Bus Services

Bus cuts in two areas

Durham

Participants in Durham noted that there had been significant recent cuts to their bus services. Buses used to run every half an hour, with an evening bus service and a night bus at 11.35pm, and there were direct routes to nearby towns such as Darlington and Sunderland. At the time of the interview, the frequency of the service had been cut significantly: the last bus was at 6pm and there were no direct routes to Darlington and Sunderland.

.....
'We used to have buses directly to Darlington and Sunderland. They just went completely off the board ...'

Female, 75+, Durham

.....
'One time we used to have a bus every half hour to go to Durham or whatever. Years ago, everybody travelled on it.'

Male, 65+, with mobility difficulties, Durham



Northampton

Participants in Northampton noted that their services had been cut dramatically over the past few years. Some said that the Sunday bus service had been cut and at the time of the interview, there were three remaining services per day, the first at 9.30am and the last at 1.30pm, with no more evening buses. Furthermore, journeys were felt to take considerably longer than previously, with a trip to Northampton taking one hour 20 minutes. The most recent cuts were supposed to be temporary, and participants said they had been assured by their councillors that those temporary cuts would finish in September 2012. However at the time of the research (November 2012) the cuts were still in place.

.....
'When we talked to the councillors they said, "Well it's only until September", but I think once you've lost it they're not going to put it back on are they? You know, we did sign petitions not to cut it ...'

Female, 65+, Northampton

.....
'It sounds daft but to get from here to Northampton in a car is 20 minutes. On a bus it's an hour and 20 minutes.'

Female, 75+, with mobility difficulties, Northampton

Social isolation

Impact on social life

Cost

Older people frequently said that the cuts to bus services had impacted significantly on their ability to meet friends and take part in social activities. Without access to bus transport, some of the participants felt that they had the difficult choice of paying for a taxi or foregoing many important aspects of social life. Those who could not afford the taxi fare did not even have this choice.

‘When you’re on a pension, you can’t always afford to do it [pay for taxis]. It’s as simple as that really.’

Male, 65+, with mobility difficulties, Durham

‘If you get the chance to go out with anything going on in town with my friend I can’t go. Sometimes they have little dos on ... like little concerts where they go for the meals and things like that and if I’m invited ... because I used to go a lot, I can’t go now. It’s a bit pricey getting a taxi because you’ve got to pay. They come out from Durham; they charge you from Durham coming out.’

Female, 75+, with mobility and sensory difficulties, Durham

Activities

Some Durham participants said that cuts to bus services meant they could no longer go to Sunderland, a distance of some 14 miles – ‘I used to like going to Sunderland... but it’s stopped, all that’ – or go out in the evening, for example to the theatre, bingo or cinema. Some interviewees felt as though they were missing out on events and on the opportunity to enjoy their retirement. Participants felt this was unfair, as they had spent their lives working hard in the hope that they would enjoy some pleasures of retirement.

‘I feel annoyed because the simple reason is there’s many a time we’d like to do something else but we can’t because of times and buses. I think we’ve missed out on a lot of social life, more so now that we’re retired ... we’ve done our bit, working all our lives.’

Male, 65+, with mobility difficulties, Durham

Participants in Durham and Northampton wanted to have a Sunday bus service as they felt they could not go anywhere on a Sunday and felt isolated.

‘You know, you walked along the embankment at Bedford. I mean everyone ... you know on a Sunday and then you caught the bus home.’

Female, 65+, with mobility difficulties, Northampton

‘You’re bored to tears on a Sunday when you can’t go out. I mean you can’t even go to a church service.’

Female, 75+, with mobility and sensory difficulties, Durham

Worrying about getting home

A particularly strong theme that emerged from these interviews was the sense of worry and anxiety felt by several participants when they did get the opportunity to go out. These interviewees felt worried or 'frightened' that they would miss their last bus back home and get stranded which could deter them from going out and socialising.

.....
'Well you can't go anywhere. I mean, you can use your bus pass if you wanted to go to Scarborough during the summer, but it's no good! You could get there, but if the second bus coming back to Durham is late, you've had it! You can't get home!'

Female, 75+, Durham

.....
'I daren't go to my dance class because I'd never get back home so I just came home, I never went.'

Female, 75+, with mobility difficulties, Northampton

.....
'Well you worry, don't you? All the time. I always make sure I make it back.'

Female, 75+, with sensory and mobility difficulties, Durham

The bus as social space

Some participants said that the bus journey itself was a sociable activity, allowing them and people in their community to check up on one another and have an opportunity to talk to someone during the day.

.....
'Really when you're on a bus there is company because somebody usually talks to you. There's a social side you see as well if you go out ... I could get in my car, go out, come back and not see anybody really ... It didn't hit me until as I say when I was poorly and I thought then you do realise what you do miss.'

Female, 65+, with mobility difficulties, Northampton

.....
'Also, it might sound silly but we miss the company because when we all got on the bus you all said "good morning", "good afternoon", and they were all people you went to school with because we're all pensioners ... but now we don't get to see each other. You know, I mean it's very rare you meet the people now. It's a shame really because that was nice ...'

Female, 65+, Northampton

Involvement in community

Some older people felt it was harder for them to keep up their voluntary work or charitable activities as a result of the bus service cuts. Interviewees were involved in a range of activities including: organising monthly luncheons for older people, fundraising for charities, creating craftwork to be sold for charity and volunteering with the Girl Guides.

‘So I help out as much as I can and I do the charity walk once a year. I love helping ... they do coffee mornings, they do lots of evening dos [and] they do an annual big dance.’

Female, 75+, with mobility difficulties, Northampton

Others also felt cuts to their bus services made it harder for them to see or support their families for example by looking after grandchildren when needed. Participants felt that this impacted both on their own independence and their ability to contribute to their family and wider community.

‘I’ve got a family ... the other daughter hasn’t got a car. Now they used to come regularly on a Sunday and have the Sunday lunch ... but the youngest one can’t now because my daughter doesn’t always have the car and there are no buses. My wife feels guilty because you know; we don’t see her that much.’

Male, 65+, with mobility difficulties, Durham

Some mentioned they had missed out on national celebrations or community events due to the cuts.

‘When the Olympic torch went through the next village they said “please come and support” but how could we? It was on a Sunday and there weren’t any buses. We couldn’t go; we just had to watch it on the telly ... I mean, it’ll never happen again.’

Female, 75+, Durham



Health

Accessing healthcare

Participants felt that cuts to bus services made it more difficult for them to access their doctor's surgery. In particular, some of the Durham participants spoke about the difficulty they had in getting to doctors' appointments in Rainton, a nearby village. Some interviewees said GP surgery staff often made an effort to provide them with appointments that were compatible with the bus timetables, but even with this help they still found it difficult to get to their appointments on time using the bus.

'The people that go to the Rainton one – they've got to go to Durham and get on a Sunderland bus and go all the way back to Rainton to get to their doctor's because there are no buses now, no buses at all. There used to be a bus that dropped them off at Rainton. It went direct to Sunderland and then it turned round and came back and went to Darlington. But that's gone now too.'

Female, 75+, Durham

In both areas, interviewees felt it was difficult to get to hospital appointments. Older people in Durham reported that they had to take two buses to the hospital and in Northampton they had to take three.

'If we go to Kettering hospital we have to go down on a bus into the town and then one into Kettering and then from Kettering up to the hospital, so that is three buses we have to catch.'

Female, 75+, with mobility difficulties, Northampton

Participants said they often relied on friends and family to take them to hospital; however some felt guilty about this and would have preferred to travel independently.

'I don't like asking anybody. I mean, I try and do it myself ... you know, I've had my daughters take me. They've had to take time off work to take me because you can't use the bus.'

Female, 65+, Northampton

'I've got friends that will give us a lift if it's a time where I need it, like a major appointment up at the hospital which I've got next week ... but you don't want to keep asking folks for a lift, you know? You don't like asking people all the time. I'd rather get there myself.'

Male, 65+, with mobility difficulties, Durham



Hospital visiting times

Some interviewees mentioned that cuts to bus services had impacted on their ability to visit friends in hospital, or for people to visit them when they were in hospital.

‘People that have got anyone in hospital that haven’t got a car can’t get to the night time visiting because we don’t have a bus back.’

Female, 75+, with mobility and sensory difficulties, Durham

‘I’ve been in hospital and without a car; I could only have the visitors who had a car. It’s the same for everybody, you can’t visit them or anything... there’s nothing worse than being in hospital and [having] no visitors.’

Female, 75+, Durham

‘My friend actually, she’s dying and I can’t go to see her now because I have no transport to get there.’

Female, 75+, with mobility and sensory difficulties, Durham

Waiting for the bus

Interviewees often said that waiting for the buses affected their health, as they felt cold and often had to stand for quite a long time.

‘As I say this time of year, you know, you can get very wet and if you have to be in your wet clothes that is not very good. You know, to sit then and for how long you are going to be in the hospital, you never know.’

Female, 75+, with mobility difficulties, Northampton



Finance

Food, shopping and taxis

Food shopping had become more expensive for people who had suffered cuts to much-needed bus services to large supermarkets. Added expense arose from the cost of taking a taxi to more distant shops, or from buying groceries from local shops which tended to have higher prices. Others said that it had become more difficult to carry food shopping home because buses did not stop as close to home as previously, or did not run as frequently as before.

.....
‘So what I do is I get a big shop and we have a very good taxi man who will come down and we go to Asda, which is the biggest shop.’
Female, 75+, with mobility difficulties, Northampton

.....
‘Without a car I think it would be almost impossible to do shopping in Rushton ... I could get the Northampton bus into town, but once I am there, I wouldn’t be able to do my shopping and get that bus back, because it doesn’t come back this way. So you would have to get a taxi back with all the shopping.’
Couple, 65+, with mobility difficulties, Northampton

.....
‘To do shopping like this week, I have a job to carry it so I have to have a taxi home which puts money on your shopping bill that you can’t really afford.’
Female, 65+, Northampton



Social activities

The cost of getting a taxi meant that some participants felt that they could not go on social outings deliberately selected to the cinema or to dances. One participant said a taxi home from Durham in the evening time when she went to the theatre cost her £12.50. For many older people this will be a significant outlay; a single person just receiving a basic pension topped up to the standard level of Pension Credit will have a weekly income of £142.70.

Bus services

Reliability

Several interviewees said they could not rely on the buses to arrive or leave on time. Participants cited delays of up to one hour.

.....
'I stood there the other week 20 minutes and I was just about to turn home when it came up the road. You're annoyed when they don't turn up or have one coming late, especially when there's only one every two hours.'

Male, 65+, with mobility difficulties, Durham

.....
'I mean you can understand five minutes or so, you know, that is not bad either way, or even ten minutes we think we are lucky, but when it gets to you know, 20 minutes that is a bit... especially if you are relying to get back for something or another. It can be a bit frustrating.'

Female, 65+, with mobility difficulties, Northampton

.....
'A week past Saturday, I managed to get into Durham, to the chemist. I had to go in. I waited ages and ages ... coming back, we waited a full hour.'

Female, 75+, with mobility difficulties, Durham

Participants wanted to be able to rely on their buses to arrive on time and provide a service that they could trust.

Information

As some older people did not use the internet, they felt it was difficult to access information about changes to the bus services, bus timetables or bus stops. Participants said they mainly relied upon word-of-mouth to get information on changes to their bus services. Some said they went to the library to get information.

Shelters

Several older people spoke about the lack of bus shelters and seating at their bus stops. They found it difficult to stand for long periods of time, and felt cold as they waited for their buses to arrive. One interviewee also said the condition of her bus stop was unsanitary.

.....
'It's filthy and disgusting. There's vomit in it and dog dirt ... and it's all cigarette ends all over the place. Sometimes it's so bad you cannot even stand in it to get the bus. It's disgraceful, but I mean, there's nowhere else to stand.'

Female, 75+, with mobility difficulties, Durham

.....
'When you are coming back the buses are often 10, 15, 20 minutes late, which is, when you are standing in the cold it is not very good and there is no seats in the shelter for us elderly ones and my husband has a job of standing too long, so this is quite a job.'

Female, 75+, with mobility difficulties, Northampton

Future cuts

Isolation

Participants typically said that they would feel very isolated if there were further cuts to their bus services.

.....
‘I’d be devastated if they took any more buses off. It means I’d be stuck here and when you’re sitting here 24/7 on your own it’s not very ... when you can’t get out very far I mean, you can’t socialise or anything like you used to or you know, mix with people as much.’

Female, 75+, with sensory and mobility difficulties, Durham

.....
‘You just wouldn’t go out, would you? You’d be more isolated. Definitely more isolated.’

Female, 65+, with mobility difficulties, Northampton

Some participants felt worried at the prospect of further cuts to the bus services they depended on for so many aspects of their lives such as shopping, visiting friends and family, to socialising and accessing healthcare.

.....
‘It’s the only thing people [like me] have got. They rely on the bus! I mean, it’s only three an hour.’

Female, 75+, with mobility difficulties, Durham



Consultation

Interviewees said they wanted those responsible for local bus services to provide better communication with bus passengers, to help ensure that the service met the needs of local people.

.....
‘Talk to the local people and get their ideas and opinions ... the opinion around here is that they made the decision before they even put it to you ... It’s us that’s affected. So we need to be consulted.’

Female, 75+, with mobility difficulties, Northampton

CASE STUDY 1

About Mrs H

Mrs H, who is 72, has lived in a small village outside Durham all of her life, in that time she has seen considerable changes to the bus services in her area. She recalls when the buses ran frequently and to time and were the main form of transport for people living in the village.

As a child, she attended school in Durham and she remembers there were buses every five minutes from the crossroads, connecting up all the surrounding villages in the area. Later, when she had a job in a neighbouring village, the buses came every half hour. This has changed dramatically as the bus is no longer the main source of transport for people in her area; most people now drive. Due to this change, in the past few years the bus services in her area have been cut, making it much more difficult for her to leave her village.

How Mrs H uses bus services

Mrs H considers the bus to be a vital service that connects her to the community, doctor, and her friends and relatives. Like many older people in her village, she does not have a car and relies on the bus to travel around her area.

Cuts to her bus services and her failing eyesight have made it more difficult for her to get out and about, meaning that she feels increasingly isolated and that her world is closing in around her. This has made her more dependent upon others for transport. She sometimes gets lifts from her son or her friends and she now travels with a friend when making journeys that require an interchange on the bus.

For example, on Fridays when she visits her sister-in-law in hospital, her friend drives her because the bus comes only every two hours and there is an interchange involved. Mrs H has macular degeneration which makes it difficult for her to see the 'purple buses' when she has to make an interchange as she mistakes them for cars.

How cuts to bus services have impacted upon Mrs H

Shopping

The Saturday bus service to Sunderland has now been cut, limiting the number of shops she can visit. She used to go to Sunderland on the bus every weekend but now only goes once in a while, when her friend can help her to navigate the interchange at one of the surrounding small villages. When they come back from Sunderland in the evening, they get a taxi. They do this because they worry that if they got back to the interchange point and missed a bus, they would have half an hour to wait and there are no bus shelters there. The taxi costs £15, a significant amount of her weekly budget. She misses her trips to Sunderland and thinks it would make a big difference if that service was brought back, allowing her to travel there independently.

She also used to visit the Metrocentre when a bus ran there, although she now only goes when she can get a lift.

Entertainment

One evening recently, Mrs H went to Durham to go to the theatre with a friend and she had to pay £12.50 for a taxi home, as there is no evening bus service. The additional travel costs now make a simple trip to the theatre unaffordable. Before the cuts the last bus travelled through the village at 11:35pm, however now the last bus leaves at 6pm. She fondly remembers the time last year when her son came to visit and they went to see the Christmas lights in Durham. She thoroughly enjoyed it, however she was unable to see the lights this year as there is no evening bus service and a taxi would be too expensive. The lack of affordable transport means she feels that she misses out on much of the entertainment her area has to offer.

Hospital and health

Mrs H's GP surgery is in a neighbouring village and complicated bus routes act as obstacles to accessing essential services. The bus route is winding and the journey takes a long time, even though the surgery is only five or ten minutes away by car. She remembers one occasion when her doctor's appointment was at half past eight. After the appointment, she was unable to get back to her home until half past ten because she missed a bus to Durham and had to wait for the next bus. There is no shelter at the bus stop and on that occasion it was raining.

Mrs H also has a long journey to reach her hospital and needs to take two buses to get there.

.....
'People that have got anyone in hospital that haven't got a car can't get to the night time visiting because we don't have a bus back. You see, they don't think of things like that.'

Concerns

Mrs H feels it is unfair that buses travel to other villages and miss her village out. She feels she has done her bit for her country, working and raising her family but she now feels forgotten and restricted to the confines of her home by the cuts to her bus services. She worries about going out, the length of time it would take to get there and the times of the last bus. She sees every journey as a military operation with obstacles to be navigated, rather than an opportunity to socialise and enjoy herself.

If there were additional cuts to the bus services, she feels it would be difficult to get out at all. Mrs H used to enjoy travelling into Durham and walking along the river banks on Sundays taking in the air, but she is unable to do that now. It is something she misses, along with her weekly trips to Sunderland.

CASE STUDY 2

About Mrs L

Mrs L, who is now over 75, has lived in a small village near Durham all her life. She remembers when there was a village hall where she used to dance. Many of the activities she used to enjoy, like the dances, have stopped now and she feels that there is little left that she can enjoy.

Mrs L tries to keep active through her hobbies and daily trips to Durham. She used to enjoy baking and knitting but finds it harder these days because she is less mobile and tires easily.

.....
'I try to get out as much as I can; it's pointless sitting in. I just go into Durham every day ... I just go down to Durham and have a wander around.'

How Mrs L uses bus services

Mrs L has a long history of using the bus services and her father used to be a bus driver, something she remembers fondly. She speaks highly of the bus drivers, describing them as very friendly, helpful and warm. Nonetheless, while she enjoys the 'banter', she finds the lack of services today very difficult. She recalls when the bus services were regular and well-connected to the other villages and surrounding areas and feels this has changed a great deal.

.....
'We used to have buses directly to Darlington and Sunderland. Then they just went completely off the board ...'

Bus service cuts have meant Mrs L is unable to travel to surrounding towns in her area. When she does go out, she finds it difficult to travel without worrying about missing the last connecting bus back to her village on her journey home. She now only uses the bus to go into Durham, with the result that she feels that her world is closing in around her.

.....
'Well, you can't go anywhere. I mean you can use your bus pass if you wanted to go to Scarborough during the summer, but it's no good! You could get there, but if the second bus coming back into Durham is late, you've had it! You can't get home!'

Health and hospital

In order to get to the local hospital, Mrs L has to take two buses. As there is no late bus service, she is unable to visit friends in hospital in the evening without getting a lift. She remembers that when she was in hospital, the only people who were able to visit her were those who had a car, which made her feel isolated and lonely.

.....
'I've been in hospital and without a car, I could only have the [visitors] who had a car. There was nobody could get in to visit – and I mean it's the same for everybody, you can't visit them or anything ... there's nothing worse than being in hospital and [having] no visitors.'

Mrs L feels fortunate to be able to get a direct bus route to her GP surgery. Although the GP tries to give appointments that link up with bus times for older people, Mrs L continues to worry that she will be late for her appointments as she does not trust the bus service to arrive on time.

.....
'Doctor's appointments – luckily they try to give you one that gets you in line with the buses ... When you do get to where our doctor's is you've got quite a long way to walk. The weather's bad. Last week, I went for my flu jab. The bus was late and so of course my appointment was late. Luckily, they understand. They were able to fit me in and I got my jab.'

Food

Mrs L feels that bus services are particularly curtailed during the Christmas holiday period. Consequently, she is worried that she will find it more difficult to get to Durham to do her grocery shopping. There is a newsagent near to her home, however it is more expensive than the larger shopping centres in Durham and more than she can afford. As a result, the holiday period leaves her feeling stranded and is a source of financial worry for her, rather than being a time for relaxation.

.....
'Bank holidays you'll have nothing. Come Christmas we'll have nothing more until the Wednesday this year. It goes right over the weekend. Nothing on a Sunday ...'

Entertainment

Mrs L does not travel beyond Durham now as she is worried she might miss her bus home. She has missed out on special occasions due to a lack of bus services. This summer she wanted to see the Olympic torch but she was unable to do so, because the bus services do not run on Sundays.

.....
'When the Olympic torch went through the next village they said "please come and support" but how could we? It was a Sunday and there weren't any buses. We couldn't go; we just had to watch it on the telly. Silly little things, I mean, it'll never happen again. So, we just struggle on.'

Concerns

Mrs L feels it would be wrong to introduce further cuts to the bus services in her area. She relies on this service to continue living independently and further cuts would restrict her lifestyle considerably.

.....
'It would have an awful effect. To think that you would have to be stuck without means of getting anywhere at all, it would be awful. I mean, I know we have free bus passes and people say "what are you grumbling about" but they forget we've paid taxes all our lives for things like this. It annoys me when people who have jobs and can afford a car say we shouldn't have it. And we've got to face it, pensions aren't very big.'

CASE STUDY 3

About Mrs K

Mrs K is over 75 and has lived in a small village near Durham all her life. She feels that her area has changed considerably over the years as new people have moved in, friends have moved on or died and the community spirit has ebbed away. Recently she has felt gradually more isolated in the village.

How Mrs K uses bus services

Mrs K has been using the bus services in her area all her life. Nowadays she uses the bus to visit friends in nearby villages and to collect her pension. She occasionally travels into Durham with a friend to go shopping. In the winter she always ensures she returns home by 3pm, because she does not like going out after dark. In the longer evenings during the summertime, she will sometimes get the bus to a nearby village to join her friend for bingo or for tea.

‘Sometimes they have a little bingo on at 4 o’clock and a tea. So I go over then and then I come out and catch the bus home. That’s in the lighter nights and 6 o’clock I come home then. Other than that ... sometimes we hop on a bus to [small village] from Durham ... just somewhere to go. Not that you spend much but you just get fed up of sitting in the house.’

How cuts to bus services have impacted upon Mrs K

Social life

Before the cuts to bus services Mrs K liked to go out in the evening, for example to the Empire theatre in Sunderland, to bingo or to the cinema in Durham. She can no longer enjoy these activities since the bus services have been cut and she is unable to afford a taxi.

‘If I get the chance to go out [in the evening] with my friend I can’t go. Sometimes they have little dos on ... like little concerts where they go for the meals and things like that and if I’m invited ... because I used to go a lot, I can’t go now. It’s a bit pricey getting a taxi because you’ve got to pay them to come out from Durham.’

Mrs K also used to enjoy going out on day trips and to garden centres. She can rarely go now as the buses do not go to these places directly and she would need to make several connections. She also worries about whether or not she will be able to catch the last bus and whether or not it will turn up.

‘We like to go to garden centres and we can’t get there now. Changing that many buses, it puts you off ... I used to love going to garden centres.’

Health and hospital

Mrs K has a dear friend who is terminally ill. She is unable to visit her friend in hospital because she has no way of getting there during visiting hours due to cuts to the bus service. This is upsetting for Mrs K as she is very close to her friend and she feels she has no viable options for visiting her.

‘My friend is dying in hospital. I can’t go to see her now because I have no transport to get there and it’d take us too long to get there [and back].’

Mrs K feels that attending her own hospital appointments has become very difficult due to the poor bus service. She now needs to get two buses to the hospital and one of these (the 64) has very poor reliability.

‘The 64 bus is just hopeless. They just break down all the time.’

Concerns

When Mrs K does go out, she is ‘frightened’ anything might happen to prevent her from returning home on the bus. She feels unable to relax and enjoy the time when she is out of the house because she is constantly worrying about getting back home.

‘Well you worry, don’t you? All the time. I always make sure I make it back.’

If Mrs K could change the bus services in her area she would like to have a Sunday bus service, as well as direct buses to Sunderland. These changes would enable her to go out more frequently on a Sunday and to go shopping again in Sunderland.

‘If they ran one in the morning and one coming back in the afternoon [to Sunderland] you would socialise more with the villagers, even if it was just one a day, and one on a Sunday, because you’re bored to tears on a Sunday when you can’t go out. I mean you can’t even go to a church service.’

Mrs K would feel very isolated if there were additional cuts to the bus services. She relies on the buses to get out and socialise. As it stands, Mrs K’s socialising has been significantly limited because of cuts to the bus services and any additional cuts would exacerbate this.

‘I’d be devastated if they took any more buses off. It means I’d be stuck here and when you’re sitting here 24/7 on your own you can’t get out very far I mean, you can’t socialise or anything like you used to or you know, mix with people as much. I can’t because I can’t walk that far.’

CASE STUDY 4

About Mr C

Mr C has lived in a small village close to Durham for 47 years and is now past retirement age. His health has deteriorated over the past number of years, making it more difficult for him to travel with ease.

He loves the area, but he feels increasingly isolated as health problems and cuts to the bus services have made it more difficult for him to travel. He recalls a time when everyone used to get the bus to work, school and everywhere else. He thinks the bus services were more regular then, due to the increased demand.

‘One time we used to have a bus every half hour to go to Durham. Years ago, everybody travelled on it.’

How Mr C uses bus services

Mr C has always used buses as neither he nor his wife owns a car. They rely on buses to travel as taxis are too expensive.

‘When you’re on the pension, you can’t always afford to do it. It’s as simple as that really.’

Mr C mainly uses the bus to visit his doctor and to travel into Durham. Once a month, Mr C’s wife goes into Durham on the bus and orders their shopping as she is unable to carry it and if other items are needed, they travel into Durham at the weekend to purchase additional groceries.

How cuts to bus services have impacted upon Mr C

Health

Mr C finds the buses are often late. Last week, he and his wife travelled to the doctor and afterwards, their bus home did not arrive. When they arrived home four hours later, they were tired and stressed. Mr C often has to wait at the bus stop, and recalls he waited for 20 minutes for a bus last week, which meant that he got very cold.

‘I stood there [at the bus stop] the other week for 20 minutes, and I was just about to turn home when it [the bus] came up the road ... You’re annoyed when they [the buses] don’t turn up or have one coming late, especially when there’s only one every two hours.’

Family

Cuts to their bus services make it difficult for Mr C and his family to see one another. He has two daughters living relatively close by. One daughter has a family car, but his other daughter does not own a car and relies on the bus for transport. There is no bus service on Sundays now which means his daughter is often unable to come to them for Sunday lunch. His wife feels guilty and upset because they cannot cook her Sunday lunch very often.

Mr C also feels the scarcity of buses makes it difficult for him and his wife to see their grandchildren. For example, on weekdays, Mr C's wife takes the first bus in the morning at 6:50 from the village to Durham to babysit their grandchild. The buses leave every two hours, with a lull in the afternoon and the last bus back to the village is at 7:50pm. These timings make it difficult for Mrs C to get to and from her daughter's house to look after her grandchild.

Social isolation

As there are no buses in the evening, Mr C is unable to attend the theatre, cinema, or go for a drink at the pub. Missing out on social life annoys and frustrates him, he hoped he would be able to enjoy life after working for over 50 years.

.....
'I feel annoyed about it because the simple reason is there's many a time we'd like to do something else but we can't because we're restricted because of times and buses. I think we've missed out on a lot of social life, more so now that we're retired.'

'We've done our bit, working all our lives, and when we could start to enjoy ourselves a little bit, we can't because we can't get out and we have no means of transporting ourselves.'

He would really appreciate it if night buses were brought back; one at 10pm on a week night and at 11pm on a Saturday would be ideal. This would allow him to meet friends for a drink in the pub, or go to the cinema.

Lack of independence

Mr C does not like having to ask his friends and family for a lift, as he takes pride in his independence and ability to do things without help from other people.

.....
'I've got friends that will give me a lift if it's a time where I need it, like a major appointment up at the hospital which I've got next week ... but you don't want to keep asking folks for a lift, you know? You don't like asking people all the time. I'd rather get there myself.'

Message to bus operators

Mr C feels it is important for people who plan bus services to consider the impact the current time schedules have on him and other bus users.

.....
'I would say ... take our side of the coin, and look at the social side. I mean, if you want to go to the hospital you can't, want to go to the theatre you can't, want to go to the pictures you can't, want to go out for a meal or a drink you can't - because you haven't got the bus to get home.'

If bus services were better, he believes more people might start to use them, which would help to pay for the services to be continued.

.....
'If it was improved, more people might use it; they might leave their cars at home.'

CASE STUDY 5

About Mrs T

Mrs T is 71 and has lived in a village near Northampton all her life. Although she lives alone, one of her daughters lives close by and they see one another almost every day. She depends on bus services as her sole mode of transport.

Mrs T keeps active and enjoys knitting, crocheting, crossword puzzles and Sudoku. On Tuesdays she enjoys going to play bingo and she is also involved in the church, attending church lunches on Thursdays and going to church every Sunday.

How Mrs T uses bus services

When she moved to the village, there was a relatively good bus service which ran every two hours to a bus stop at the top of her road. She used this bus to get out to the shops. The service has recently been cut which means that Mrs T now has to walk further to a different bus stop and the bus route from there takes much longer. The bus is more crowded than it used to be, which makes it hard to get a seat and she has difficulty with the heavy shopping on the way home.

.....
‘The only way you can catch a bus now is to get on in town and it takes you half an hour and it drops you right through that place over the road. It doesn’t come down this road at all now ... it’s not so bad walking down but it’s coming back when you’ve got shopping.’

There are now three buses a day with the first calling at 9.30am and the last at 1.30pm. The retraction of a scheme that allowed pass holders to obtain vouchers for taxis ten years ago means Mrs T has to pay for a taxi or ask someone for a lift if she wants to do anything after 1.30 in the afternoon. She and the other people living in her area spoke to their councillors who assured them this was only a temporary cut that would finish in September. However, by the end of the year no moves had been made to reinstate the bus services.

.....
‘When we talked to the councillors they said well it’s only until September but I think once you’ve lost it they’re not going to put it back on are they? You know, we did sign petitions not to cut it and like I said we stopped councillors and asked them to help us but ...’

How cuts to bus services have impacted upon Mrs T

Food

Mrs T now has to take a taxi in order to do her weekly grocery shop at quite some expense.

‘To do shopping like this week I have a job to carry it, so I had to have a taxi home which puts money on your shopping bill that you can’t really afford.’

‘I used to go down to town on a Saturday where I’d just go over to the paper shop now on a Saturday ... I’d just go down and would just meet friends and wander ... you don’t do that, you really just go to shop, you know, when you need to go, not really to just meet people and have lunch and that, I don’t do that so much now.’

Social

Cuts to her bus services mean Mrs T does not go out as much socially, because she cannot afford to pay for a taxi. She feels lonelier now because pensioners living in her area used to get the bus together and the bus was a place to meet and catch up with friends and acquaintances.

‘It might sound silly but we miss the company because when we all got on the bus you all said “good morning”, “good afternoon” and they were all people you went to school with because we’re all pensioners but now we don’t see each other. You know, I mean very rare you meet the people now. It’s a shame really because that was nice ...’

Independence

Mrs T sometimes gets lifts from her daughter, however she does not like to ask, particularly for longer lifts to take her further than the town for essentials like doctor’s appointments or food shopping.

‘No, I don’t ask, I try not to bother them too much, no. It’s just into town.’

Concerns

Further reduction of her bus services would make it even more difficult for Mrs T to socialise, reach her doctor and travel into town to the shops. Mrs T feels further cuts would make her more lonely and isolated, as she would not be able to get out and visit her grandchildren, or friends in hospital.

CASE STUDY 6

About Mr and Mrs D

Mr D has been living in the Northampton area with his wife for 48 years. They have three children, two sons and a daughter. Their oldest son lives around the corner from them with his family and they have a number of friends living in the town. They are quite active and have a car, which allows them to travel relatively freely.

How Mr and Mrs D use bus services

Before her husband retired, Mrs D used to use the buses all the time, now they both use buses but they feel lucky to have the option of driving. Living in a rural area, they worry about the future if Mr D can no longer drive and they become reliant on buses for transport. Grocery shopping and attending doctor's appointments would become very difficult without a car, as the bus journey to Northampton takes significantly longer at an hour and a half, compared to going by car which takes 20 minutes.

.....
'But what happens when we can't run a car? You know as you get older that is, that would be a real problem.'

Mrs D

.....
'We couldn't go to the doctor's; we couldn't do our weekly shopping, not without taxis for both of those things. We wouldn't be able to go to see quite a few of our friends around the town because they live in all sorts of places ... it would really restrict us. And that is without a car. See, you don't realise how much you would need to have a car. Whereas I used to enjoy going on buses because it was freedom, you know, you just go ... it is curtailed quite a bit now.'

Mrs D

How cuts to bus services have impacted upon Mr and Mrs D

.....
'At the back of your mind you have got to think eventually we will both be on buses. And we are an ageing population. Much as I hate to say that, but we are. And you have to be realistic, so hopefully you know, you will be able to run a car for years, but you don't know.'

Mrs D

.....
'My one worry is that as we get a lot older there won't be any buses, you can see it happening. Or that the prices will be so expensive that pensioners won't be able to afford it, it's difficult.'

Mrs D

Conclusion

It is essential that as people age, they can still get out, access local services and travel further afield if they want.

As these case studies have shown, for too many people in rural areas, frequent and reliable transport does not exist following cuts to grants to bus operators and to local authority budgets.

The irony is that free national bus travel has been a significant success, with more and more people applying for the concession since its introduction in 2008. Currently there are 9.9 million holders in England. And research by Imperial College in 2012 suggested that the bus pass encouraged holders to be more physically active, an outcome unaffected by income.

But for those older people living in locations where buses no longer deliver a service they feel they can use, there need to be viable alternatives. While some can continue to drive, this is not an option for everyone and it risks a situation where people will choose to drive when it may no longer be appropriate for them to do so. Although older drivers have far fewer crashes than younger drivers, an older person's risk of being killed or suffering a serious injury as a result of a road crash is between two and five times greater than that of a younger person.

Recommendation

- Government must find new ways to pool transport budgets at a national and local level, so that we can ease the impact of cuts. Transport planning should take into account the views and needs of older people.
- Where private travel is not possible and the public transport system does not fully serve the needs of older people in the area, then local authorities should be expected to provide financial support towards community transport or taxis.
- Those local authorities who have recently withdrawn token or swipe card systems to pay for community transport or taxis should reinstate them. It is a short sighted policy for these entitlements to be withdrawn in a time of austerity and risks increasing social exclusion among older people.
- Where rural bus services do exist, they should be promoted and their use should be encouraged; employees should receive training on providing appropriate assistance, including enforcement of priority seating on buses and improvements in safety.
- Government needs to ensure that policies around community transport are 'rural proofed'; in other words they must be assessed for how they will work for rural people and places, thereby ensuring they are implemented fairly and effectively.

Tavis House
1–6 Tavistock Square
London WC1H 9NA
0800 169 80 80
www.ageuk.org.uk

