



WHEELS OF CHANGE

**PROMOTING FAIR AND
GREEN TRANSPORT IN
RURAL SCOTLAND**

**Maya Singer Hobbs
and Stephen Frost**

June 2024

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“

I'm in a transport crisis. The cost of living has had a massive impact – rent has gone up, everything has gone up, I can't cut back on anything else. On the car, my insurance premiums have gone up, maintenance has gone up, fuel has gone up. I feel priced out of owning a car, but I can't afford the buses.

“

I can't afford to buy food in the local shop where it's 10 times more expensive than the supermarket, but getting there is a nightmare. My son takes the bus to school because he gets a free bus pass, but it gets him there 45 minutes early, and he'll often miss it on the way home because it leaves 5 minutes after the end of the school day.

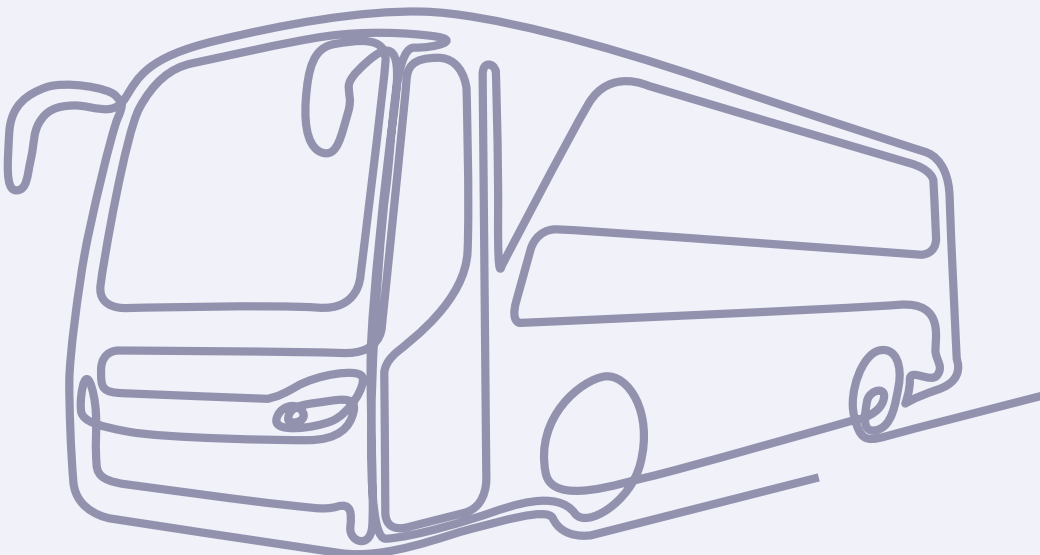
“

"I feel like because I'm poor and I rely on my car for my work (because I have to carry equipment with me) I'm being punished. There doesn't seem to be any way to get involved in the decisions that are made, it feels like no one cares. If you're on a lower income it feels like you're looked down on, and people thinking it's your fault that you're in a low paying job."

“

"I like where I live, it's just me and my son, and it feels safe. I don't want to move back to the city, but it's getting to the point where I can't afford to live out here."

In-depth interview with participant



SUMMARY

Transport in rural Scotland is not working for the people living there, particularly those on low incomes. Despite various strategies, road maps and reports, people living in rural Scotland do not feel their transport needs have been considered. At best, many feel the system has not got worse. But for others, declining bus provision and the cost of living crisis has had a significant negative impact on their experience of getting around.

The Scottish government has committed to a 20 per cent reduction in car miles by 2030 (from a 2019 baseline). This is a climate-driven commitment, but it provides an opportunity to reconsider the transport system to make sure it works for everyone. Good quality transport systems mean that people have access to employment, education and other public services. It plays a key role in preventing isolation and loneliness and is important for local economic activity. However, the Scottish government is off track to meet its net zero commitments. Car use in Scotland has continued to grow, while bus provision and patronage have fallen.

This work drew on in-depth interviews and a workshop with members of the public living in rural Scotland on low incomes to understand what their experience of the transport system is like. Through this process a series of themes were identified. Using these and the workshop, a set of principles to guide transport policymaking in Scotland were identified.

- **Action should be taken first by those who are most able to make changes:** this includes people who are wealthy and/or live in cities and those who make unnecessary car journeys.
- **People in positions of power (political, financial or otherwise) should lead the way:** decision makers and businesses must be seen to be making changes to reduce their emissions.
- **Infrastructure first:** for people to make changes there need to be viable alternatives, and they need to feel that they have a choice which goes beyond just car ownership or buses (for example, safe active travel routes or trains).
- **The aim should be to make the transport system fairer:** this means that some will have to reduce their car use, but others will see their mobility increase.
- **Engagement:** the needs of people living in rural areas vary significantly, and those who will be impacted should have an opportunity for meaningful engagement.
- **Affordability:** public transport must be made more affordable to ensure it is accessible to those living on low incomes.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Using the principles as a starting point and building on other findings throughout the research, there are three overarching recommendations to fairly address rural transport emissions and reduce car kilometres:

- **The Scottish government, in conjunction with Transport Scotland, must set out a credible delivery plan for reducing transport emissions and car kilometres by 2030 and beyond.** The plan must clearly set out how the goals to reduce car use will be achieved, including how the benefits of reducing car dependency across the whole country will be felt in rural areas.

- **Identify, fund and champion anchor towns and communities which should provide public services and transport hubs for people living rurally.** Anchor towns should ensure people can ‘live well locally’ by providing necessary public services. Transport hubs should support multimodal trips, and have good public transport links to surrounding areas and safe active travel routes.
- **People living in rural Scotland must be engaged and involved in transport decision making.** Regional transport authorities should establish deliberative processes to ensure policies and ideas can be discussed with those who are commonly marginalised in decision-making processes, including people living on low incomes, minority ethnic groups, people with disabilities and young people.

1. INTRODUCTION

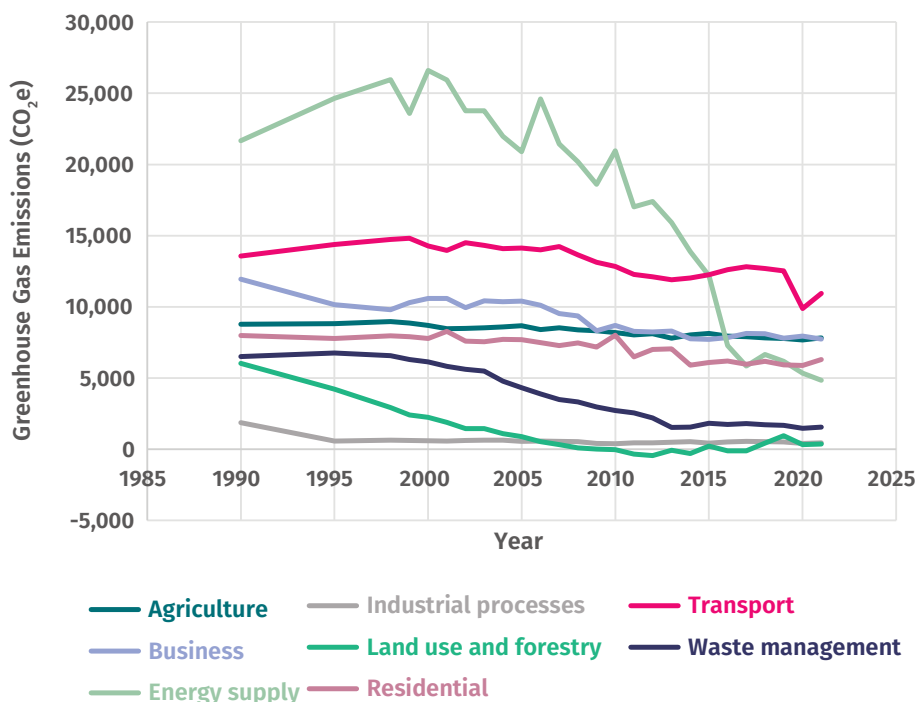
“Remote and rural areas are particularly underserved by Scotland’s existing transport infrastructure ... and this poses major barriers to investment and workforce mobility, risking depopulation, isolation, additional costs borne disproportionately by local communities, and failure across a host of Just Transition Outcomes. Expansion of electric vehicle ownership will not suffice, given the limitations of car infrastructure in serving all parts of our communities. This will require an overhaul of regional and local public transport provision and infrastructure and significant investment to make these more affordable, higher quality and better designed for citizens.”

Scotland’s Just Transition Commission (2022)

Addressing rural transport needs is challenging, but Scotland’s Just Transition Commission clearly outlines the risks associated with failing to address them. These risks encompass poor economic outcomes, depopulation of rural or island communities, increased costs for those who live in rural Scotland, increased isolation, and failure to meet climate commitments.

FIGURE 1.1: TRANSPORT NOW ACCOUNTS FOR MORE EMISSIONS THAN ANY OTHER SOURCE OF EMISSIONS IN SCOTLAND (26%) AND HAS NOT REDUCED SIGNIFICANTLY OVER THE PAST 30 YEARS¹

Greenhouse gas emissions (CO₂e) in Scotland by sector, 1990–2021



Source: National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory (2023)

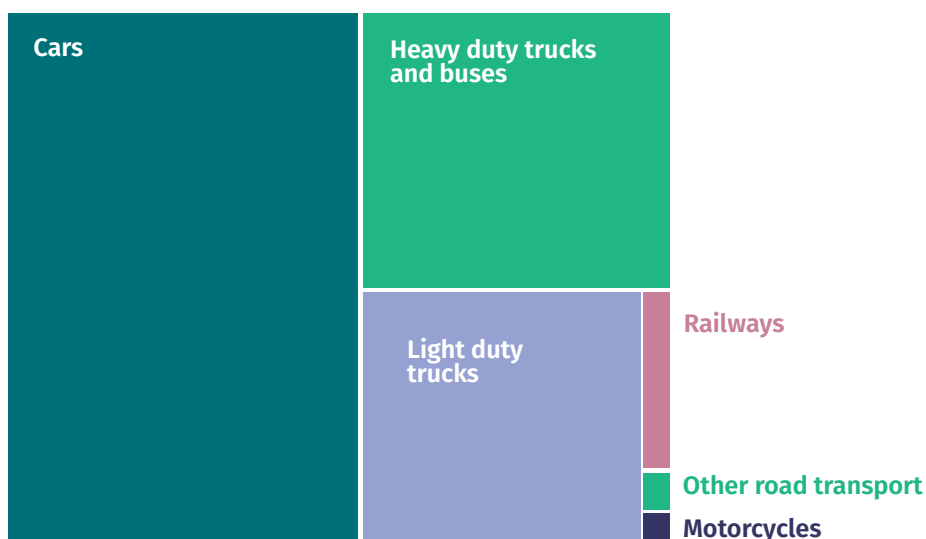
¹ Note that land use and forestry have negative emissions in the 2010s due to acting as a CO₂ sink, where carbon dioxide is removed from the atmosphere.

In the most recent Climate Change Committee (CCC) report on Scotland’s progress, published in March 2024, they state that they “no longer believe that the Scottish government will meet its statutory 2030 goal to reduce emissions by 75 per cent” (CCC 2024). This assessment makes clear that the transport sector requires a particularly rapid increase in the rate of emissions reduction and that the Scottish government lacks a strategy on how to deliver this.

In Scotland in 2021, transport accounted for 26 per cent of all emissions. Since 2015 transport has been Scotland’s highest source of emissions as, unlike energy supply, transport emissions have remained relatively constant for the past 30 years (figure 1.1). Of those emissions, 54 per cent are attributed to cars (figure 1.2).

FIGURE 1.2: CARS ACCOUNTED FOR OVER 50% OF ALL LAND TRANSPORT EMISSIONS IN SCOTLAND IN 2021

Greenhouse gas emissions (CO2e) in Scotland of all land transport in 2021 (%)



Source: National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory (2023)

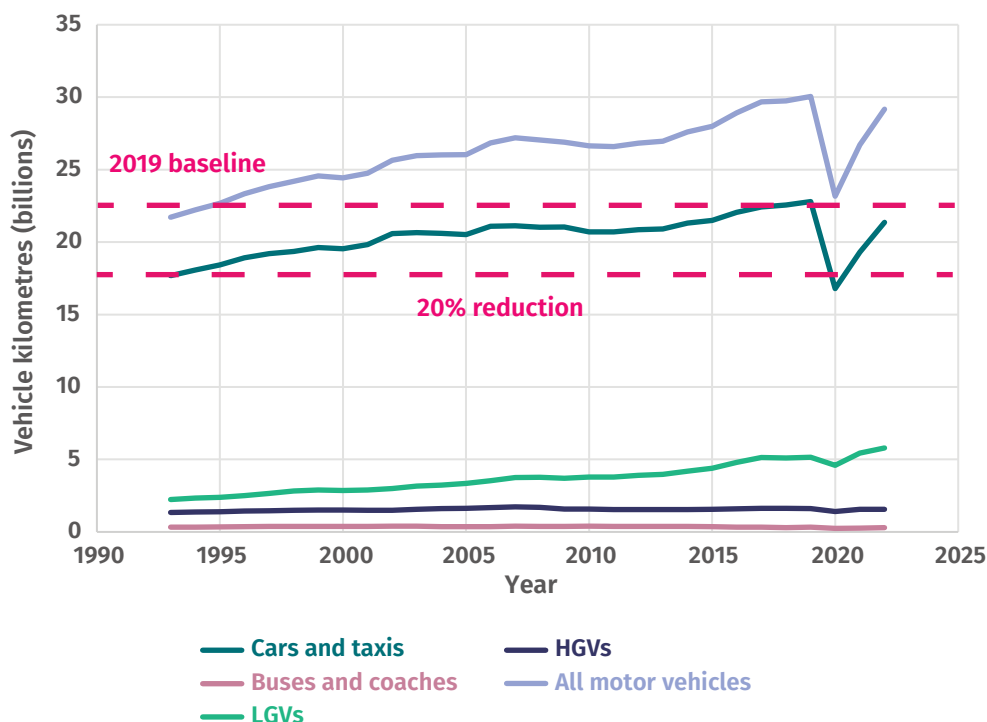
In 2020, the Scottish government pledged to reduce car miles by 20 per cent by 2030, relative to a 2019 baseline (Transport Scotland 2020a) of 22.8 billion miles.² A 20 per cent reduction would be 4.56 billion miles, resulting in 18.2 billion miles per year. The last time so few car miles were driven in Scotland was in 1994 (DfT 2023a).

Transport Scotland have outlined four behaviours to achieve a 20 per cent reduction in car miles: reducing the need to travel; living well locally; switching modes; and combining or sharing trips (Transport Scotland 2022). These behaviours apply across urban and rural settings, but the route map highlights the unique challenges rural communities face in reducing car use. Achieving a 20 per cent reduction across all of Scotland does not require everywhere to reduce car miles by 20 per cent. Both Edinburgh and Glasgow have set targets to reduce car miles by 30 per cent by 2030 (Edinburgh City Council 2021 and Glasgow City Council 2021), which means that some other places will be able to reduce their miles by less than 20 per cent.

² The 2019 baseline refers to the number of car miles driven in 2019.

FIGURE 1.3: VEHICLE KILOMETRES DRIVEN HAVE INCREASED STEADILY OVER THE PAST 20 YEARS, AND HAVE REBOUNDED SINCE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC TO ALMOST PRE-PANDEMIC LEVELS

Vehicle kilometres (billions) in Scotland 1993–2022. 2019 baseline shown and corresponding 20 per cent reduction



Source: DfT 2023a

The initial report of the second Just Transition Commission (2022) highlighted that achieving net zero offers an opportunity to ‘rebuild our broken transport system’. The commission identified three strategic priorities that should guide the approach:

- high quality, affordable public transportation
- targeted investment
- a transport system that meets remote and rural needs.

The prominence of rural and remote communities in the strategic priorities indicates the importance of ensuring these are not an afterthought when it comes to reimagining Scotland’s transport system.

However, Scottish government pledges have not translated into the action needed to reduce car miles, as evidenced in the rebound of traffic post-lockdown. The Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on car use, but car miles driven are now on track to return to pre-pandemic levels (figure 1.2) rather than delivering the reduction needed to achieve the 2030 target.

Similarly, the priorities outlined in the Just Transition Commission report have not translated into meaningful action. Rural transport continues to lag behind urban transport, both in terms of the baseline access to transport and a lack of interventions to improve the transport system or reduce car miles.

The lag in interventions on rural transport can be attributed to several factors, not least that addressing rural transport needs is complex. In 2023, the UK government published *Future of Transport: supporting rural transport innovation*, a document which outlined some of the transport challenges facing rural communities, as identified by a consultation carried out in 2020 (DfT 2023b). The challenges identified include: poor access to services in rural areas; a lack of genuine choice for completing journeys; commercial challenges for operators due to long distances and sparse populations; and heightened loneliness and isolation. The first three of these challenges lead to increased car dependency³ and act as a barrier to meeting Scotland's target of reducing car miles.

In Scotland, the number of households without access to a regular bus is 64,000 (BBC News Scotland 2022); since 2007 over 1,200 bus routes have been lost (O'Neil 2023). The lack of public transport and access to services in rural areas has been exacerbated by the rising cost of bus travel. Despite the roll-out of various concessionary fares, in the five years to 2021 bus fares in Scotland rose by 11 per cent⁴ in cash terms (Transport Scotland 2023a).

Transport Scotland's strategy is explicit that the vision for the transport system should reduce inequalities through addressing these issues by providing access to services and ensuring it is affordable for everyone (ibid).

Tourism plays a large part in the economy in Scotland, where it accounts for one in 12 businesses across the country (Scottish government 2018). Some of that tourism relies on driving - for example, the North Coast 500 touring route. For communities that rely on tourism as a significant contributor to the economy, interventions to reduce car use must be careful to account for unintended consequences. Investigating the contributions of tourism-related car trips was beyond the scope of this report, but increased connectivity will bring benefits to the tourism industry alongside local communities.

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

Previous work by IPPR examined how car use could be fairly reduced in Scottish cities (Massey-Chase et al 2022). In that report, IPPR argued that cities will find it easier than rural areas to rapidly reduce their transport emissions. The reasons for this are as discussed above: better connectivity (both public transport and digital), journeys tend to be shorter, improving access to services is easier in cities due to their higher density, and car ownership is starting from a lower baseline than in rural areas.

However, although reducing car use might be easier in urban areas, this does not negate the need to consider its role in rural transport decarbonisation. Decarbonising the transport system also presents an opportunity to improve it for everyone. Improving access to public or active transport, and ensuring everyone has access to essential services, should not be limited solely to those living in cities and urban areas.

To understand the challenges and opportunities needed to rethink how rural transport works, we conducted a series of interviews with stakeholders working across Scotland and rural communities in England. These interviews informed a series of 17 in depth interviews and one focus group (three participants) with

3 Car dependency refers to access to key services being determined by the ability to afford, own and run a car.

4 Fares have fallen by three per cent in real terms (controlling for inflation).

residents living on low incomes⁵ in rural and island communities. We used these findings to design a two-day workshop with 11 residents who we had previously interviewed to identify a series of principles to guide interventions. The research aimed to answer the following questions.

1. To what extent are the reasons for interventions designed to reduce car use and increase active travel supported and understood by people living on low incomes in rural areas? Do people on low incomes support the principle of reduced car use and increased active travel?
2. To what extent do people living on low incomes in rural areas believe that interventions designed to reduce car usage and increase active travel will benefit them?
3. How do people living on low incomes believe a reduction in car usage and increase in active travel in rural areas may be fairly achieved and promoted?
4. How do people living on low incomes believe the public should be engaged in the design and decision making on schemes designed to reduce car usage and increase active travel to ensure they are inclusive and serve marginalised communities?

5 Residents were living on household incomes of under £20,000 and were recruited through Criteria recruitment agency.

2. TRANSPORT IN RURAL SCOTLAND

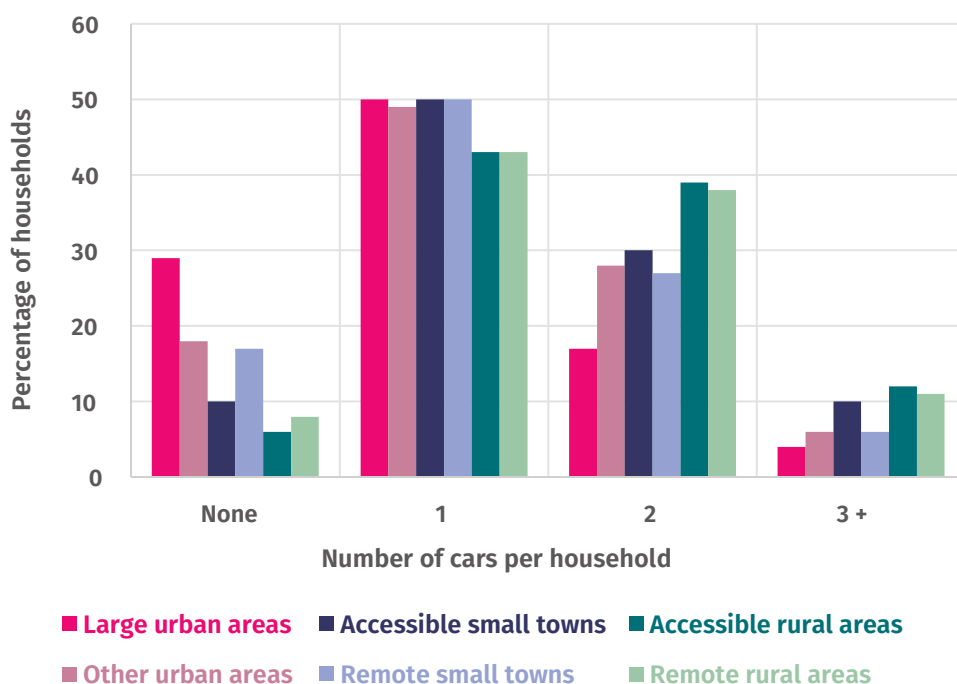
Scotland has a population density of 70 people per square kilometre (Scotland Census 2022). In comparison, England has a population density of 434 people per square kilometre (ONS 2023). Scotland’s highly sparse nature, including 93 inhabited islands (Scottish government 2023a), creates challenges for the Scottish transport network that are unique when compared to the rest of the UK. Despite the increased distances, transport in rural Scotland is characterised by many of the same traits that affect rural travel elsewhere: higher car use, less frequent (or non-existent) public transport links and a lack of services within easy access.

THE RURAL CONTEXT

Reducing car dependency and use in rural areas brings different challenges to reducing car use in urban areas: greater distances, fewer public services and poorer public transport coverage all contribute to higher levels of car dependency. This is reflected in the Scottish government’s approach to reducing car dependency, which is explicit that there will be more opportunities for those living in urban areas to reduce their car miles than those in rural areas (Transport Scotland 2022).

FIGURE 2.1: MOST HOUSEHOLDS THAT DO NOT HAVE ACCESS TO A CAR ARE IN LARGE URBAN AREAS, WHILE HOUSEHOLDS WITH MORE THAN ONE CAR ARE MORE COMMON IN RURAL AREAS

Percentage and location of households with access to a car

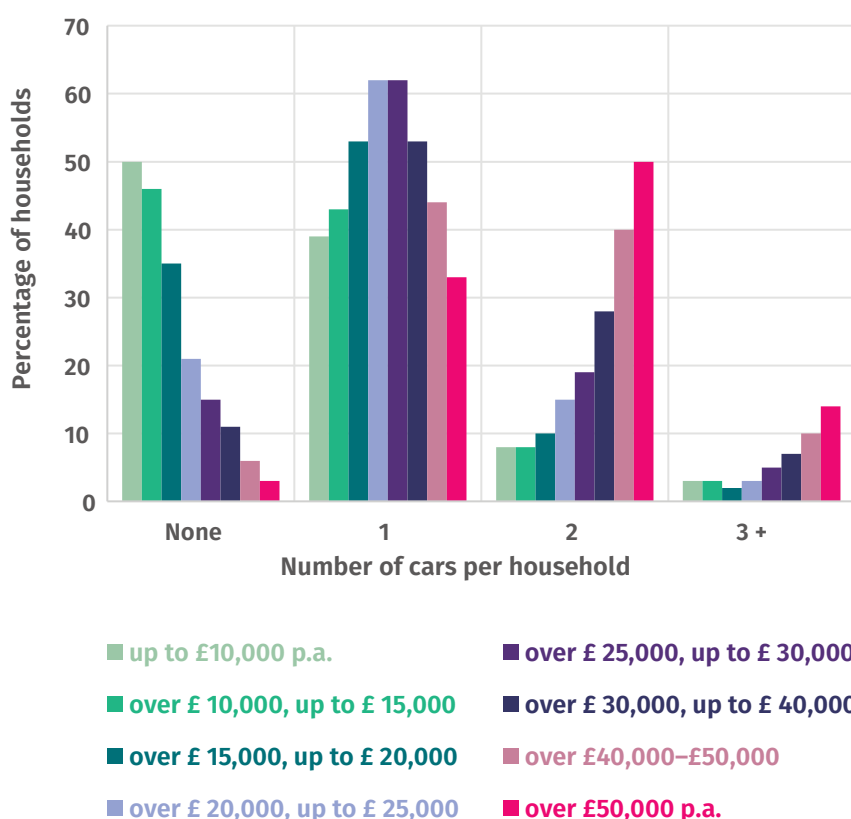


Source: Transport Scotland (2023b)

Across Scotland as a whole, 20 per cent of households do not have access to a car (figure 2.1) (Transport Scotland 2023b).⁶ The largest proportion of those – almost 30 per cent - are in large urban areas. This likely indicates both how easy it is to get around without a car, but also levels of deprivation (Transport Scotland 2023b). Although there is deprivation across parts of rural Scotland, particularly the Outer Hebrides and west Scotland, the areas with the highest levels tend to cluster around the cities (SIMD 2020).

FIGURE 2.2: THOSE LIVING ON THE LOWEST INCOMES ARE LEAST LIKELY TO HAVE ACCESS TO A CAR - AND THE GREATER YOUR INCOME, THE MORE LIKELY YOU ARE TO HAVE ACCESS TO MORE THAN ONE VEHICLE

Percentage of households with access to a car against household income



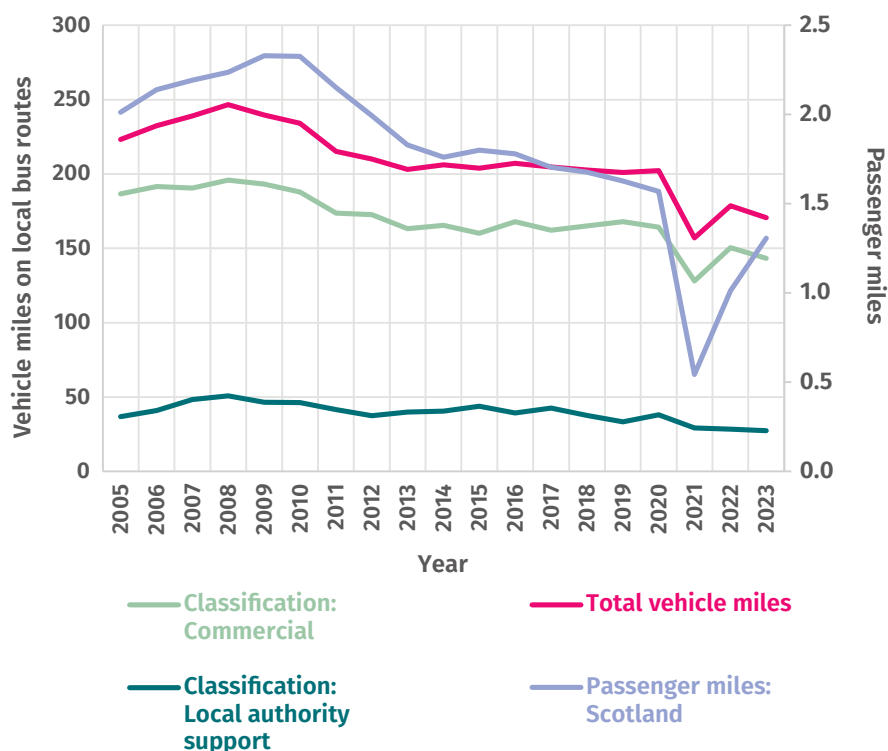
Source: Transport Scotland (2023b)

Despite the need to move quickly to reduce car use in cities, this can lead to increased car dependency in rural areas, resulting in ‘transport deserts’ where a lack of transport limits opportunities or choices for a community (Allen 2020). An overall reduction in bus services (figure 2.3) increases the risk of this happening and makes decarbonising rural transport increasingly challenging. In addition, high levels of car dependence and a lack of transport options have been shown to lead to social isolation (Edwards et al 2023).

⁶ It is worth noting that the Scottish government classifies those living in rural areas as places with populations of less than 3,000. They also quantify areas by their accessibility according to the following categories: accessible (areas that are within a 30-minute drive from a settlement with a population of over 10,000), remote (areas that are a 30–60 minute drive from a settlement of 10,000) or very remote (areas that are more than a 60 minute drive from a settlement of over 10,000).

FIGURE 2.3: THERE HAS BEEN A CLEAR DECLINE IN LOCAL BUS MILES TRAVELLED IN SCOTLAND SINCE 2005, WHICH CORRELATES WITH A DECREASE IN PASSENGER MILES TRAVELLED OVER THE SAME PERIOD. THIS DECLINE IS PARTICULARLY CLEAR IN COMMERCIAL BUS ROUTES

The decline in vehicle miles travelled by local bus routes in Scotland since 2005 and the corresponding decrease in passenger miles over the same time period



Source: authors' analysis of DfT (2023c)

'Reducing the need to travel', as identified in the national government plan, relies on access to services and the ability to work from home. Since 2010, the number of GP practices in Scotland has decreased by 11 per cent (Public Health Scotland 2022).⁷ Options to work from home in rural areas are reduced due to poor broadband and mobile phone coverage (Quantum 2021).

THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS AND TRANSPORT POVERTY IN RURAL SCOTLAND

There has rightly been considerable focus on fuel poverty in recent years as a result of the cost of living crisis. Transport poverty has received less attention, but can have similarly life-changing impacts, and the intersection between fuel and transport poverty can be particularly challenging, introducing a 'double vulnerability' (Martiskainen et al 2023).

Transport poverty will often have intersecting impacts on other parts of a person's life, including access to employment, or health and education services. The Public Health and Sustainable Transport Partnership Group, which sits within Public Health Scotland, recently published a piece directly identifying

⁷ There were 1019 GPs practices in 2010, compared to 911 in 2022.

transport poverty as a public health issue (PHS 2024). They have developed a definition of transport poverty:

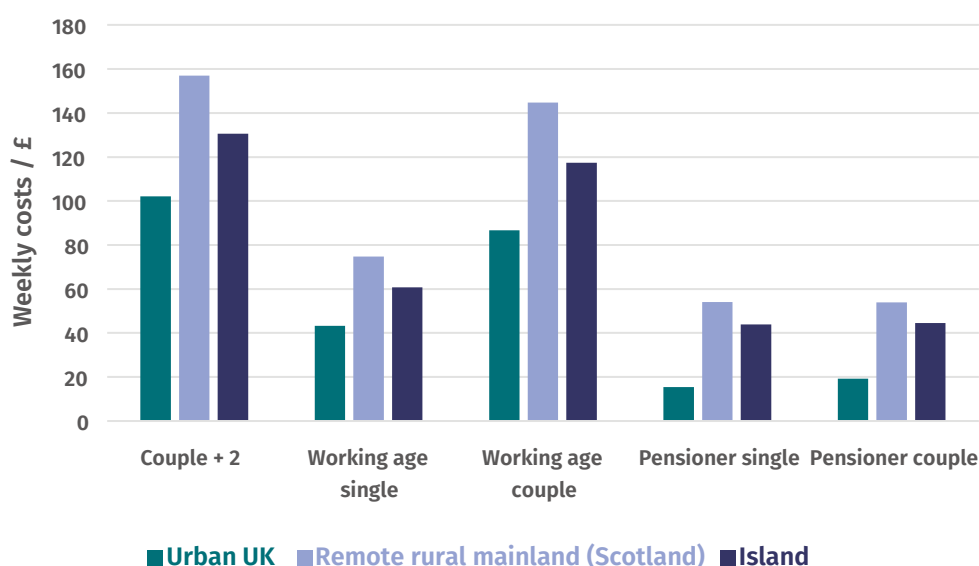
"The lack of transport options that are available, reliable, affordable, accessible or safe that allow people to meet their daily needs and achieve a reasonable quality of life."

PHS (2024)

In addition to fewer transport options, people in rural areas are at greater risk of transport poverty due to the **'rural premium'** that remote communities face. The rural premium describes how goods and services are more expensive in rural areas, something that has been exacerbated by the cost of living crisis. Scotland's National Transport Strategy suggests that these costs are due to larger distances and more expensive fuel costs in rural Scotland (Transport Scotland 2020a).⁸ Figure 2.4 illustrates how much higher rural weekly transport costs can be for some people living in remote places in Scotland, with some costs being more than 200 per cent higher (Scottish government 2021).

FIGURE 2.4: THE DIFFERENCE IN WEEKLY TRAVEL COSTS FOR PEOPLE LIVING IN RURAL SCOTLAND VS URBAN AREAS

Weekly travel costs calculated as 'minimum income standard' budgets. Field work done 2020–21



Source: Scottish government (2021)

Due to the reduced access to services that people living in rural areas already face, those in transport poverty in rural areas face a significant barrier to access necessary services. The Scottish Affairs Committee (2024) found that these higher costs mean that standard cost of living support schemes did not provide adequate support for some remote Scottish Communities.

⁸ The minimum income standard, which describes the income needed for an acceptable standard of living (Loughborough University n.d.), is sometimes used as a measure of basic costs. In rural Scotland, this is calculated to be 10 – 40 per cent higher than elsewhere in the UK (HIE 2013).

INTERVENTIONS TO DECARBONISE RURAL TRANSPORT

One of the challenges for decarbonising rural transport or reducing car use is that the starting point in terms of viable alternatives to the car is further behind urban areas. Less active travel provision, lower bus coverage, less access to services (digital services, healthcare, education) all mean that most people have to travel further distances. In this context, electric vehicles (EVs) will play a prominent role in rural transport decarbonisation strategies (Element Energy 2021 and Marsden et al 2020).

Although technology alone – electric vehicles (EVs) - will not be enough to meet net zero targets, fully reducing car use will not be possible for many people in rural areas. Therefore, EVs will play an important role in decarbonising rural transport. Scotland has high EV charging coverage,⁹ with the highest level of charging provision per 100,000 of the population after London (Edwards et al 2023), and more free chargers than any other region in the UK (Goodall 2023).

The Scottish Islands are already leading the way in EV roll-out; Orkney has one of the highest numbers per person in the UK, with 16 EVs per 1,000 motorists (Hay 2023). The shorter distances on the islands help to reassure residents about reliability and battery mileage, and provision of public charging infrastructure can be more easily managed.

“There’s lots of electric vehicles on the island since people know they can get where they’re going without running out of charge.”

Island resident, interview

EVs are cheaper to run over their lifetime than internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles, but they are expensive to buy up-front and there are limited numbers on the second-hand market. They are therefore out of reach for many people living on low incomes, who are locked out of accessing the benefits EVs bring.

BEYOND PRIVATE TRANSPORT: SHARED MOBILITY, CAR CLUBS AND COMMUNITY TRANSPORT

There is a strong case for the use of shared mobility, car clubs and community transport in rural areas to provide an alternative to costly private car ownership. A number of models are already being used in rural communities. Some of them rely on large commercial operators providing car clubs or mobility as a service (MaaS), while others are community transport systems, designed and implemented by local communities.

CASE STUDY: SHARED MOBILITY IN THE HIGHLANDS

In 2018, the Highland Council and Enterprise car club formed a partnership. Council employees were provided with access to car club or rental vehicles for business use, meaning they could access low emission vehicles.

The council have calculated that the partnership has saved them £900,000 per year in business travel costs, saved 649 tonnes of CO₂, and cut over 800,000 miles from its ‘grey fleet (employees’ own vehicles used for business trips) (The Highland Council 2019 and DfT 2023b).

The vehicles were also made available to local residents outside business hours or at weekends to help cover the costs of the programme and provide mobility options for the local community.

9 2,286 charging points across the country (Visit Scotland 2023)

In urban areas, community transport is predominantly used for social trips. Conversely, in rural areas, it is used for essential trips for people to meet their basic needs, for example to hospitals or the shop. In the face of continued cuts to bus services, and the fact that many rural bus services are not commercially viable, the Community Transport Association think we are likely to see an expansion of community transport groups stepping in to provide essential services.

CASE STUDY: GLENFARG COMMUNITY TRANSPORT GROUP

In 2022, faced with losing the only local bus service, Glenfarg Community Council and a team of volunteers established the Glenfarg Community Transport Group to deliver the bus route themselves (Ogston 2023).

The group now operates five projects: the 55 Glenfarg Bus Service, the Glenfarg Community Bus, the Glenfarg School Bus (which operates on school days to the Arngask primary school), Active Travel 'walking' and Active Travel 'wheeling'. They have an explicit aim to improve transport in and around Glenfarg, and to reduce dependence on cars (Glenfarg Community Transport n.d.).

The 55 bus was taken over from a commercial operator who had seen declining bus ridership. Since the community take-over, ridership has gone up, the regularity of the bus service was increased to hourly, and the route has been extended. The Active Travel 'wheeling' stream offers e-bike loans, training, and linking to other forms of transport in the area.

ACTIVE TRAVEL AS A RURAL MODE OF TRANSPORT

Despite perceptions that there is a limited role for active travel in rural contexts, this is not borne out by the data. More people use a bicycle to get to work in 'remote small towns' than in 'large urban areas' (Transport Scotland 2024a). In our conversations with people living rurally there was an appetite to walk or cycle more. Indeed, one of the main factors that emerged in our engagement about low use of active travel was a lack of safe infrastructure, rather than an unwillingness to walk, wheel or cycle (see section 3).

The Scottish Active Travel Framework does not explicitly mention ambitions for rural areas (Transport Scotland 2020b), although the recently published Cycling Framework did call for the improvement of rural routes (Transport Scotland 2023c). However, *A long-term vision for active travel in Scotland in 2030*, published in 2014, makes several suggestions to support people living rurally to enjoy active travel (Transport Scotland 2014). The recommendations for rural areas fall under infrastructure changes, ensuring more routes are provided and reducing speed limits in places where there are no separated routes.¹⁰ The framework also calls for better integration of transport modes to support multi-modal travel - for example, having adequate facilities to take bikes onto trains and buses.

¹⁰ The report calls for 20mph limits in urban and rural areas where there is or could be a high level of active travel activity.

CASE STUDY: LOCHINDAAL WAY

Sustrans' work illustrates the potential of active travel as a means of reducing car use in rural Scotland, and highlights a number of the insights discussed in section 3.

The Lochindaal Way route was championed, campaigned for and delivered by an active local residents group (Islay Community Access Group, ICAG) who wanted a safe route between Port Charlotte and Bruichladdich on Islay. Most of the £1.4 million funding came from the Places for Everyone programme, funded by Transport Scotland and administered via Sustrans (Sustrans 2023).

The two villages were initially connected by a 60mph A road, and active travel between them was very limited. Delivery of the route increased walking and cycling between the two villages by 560 per cent, and the proportion of trips between the two villages done by active travel by 6 per cent.¹¹

As e-bikes have grown in popularity, studies of their use have suggested they offer an exciting possibility for rural areas. Users of e-bikes travel further than those on standard bikes (Fyhri and Sundfør 2020), which makes the emissions reductions from the shift from cars to e-bikes more pronounced in rural areas (Philips et al 2022).

Another study suggests that e-bikes make hills less of a barrier to use in areas where users might otherwise be put off cycling (Philips et al 2024). It is worth noting that this study examines the opportunity of using e-bikes by residents *and* tourists, and finds opportunities for both as an emissions reduction measure. There are opportunities to promote the use of e-bikes among tourists, while also boosting the local economy through bike hire options. A study in Wales where people received e-bikes on loan found that although people living rurally made fewer trips than those living in urban areas, the trips they made tended to be longer.

CONCESSIONARY OR REDUCED TRAVEL FARES

Scotland provides free bus travel for people under 22, over 60, and those with disabilities. Between January 2022 and April 2023, 62 million free bus trips were made using the concessionary pass (Transport Scotland 2023d), and uptake of the bus pass among eligible people under 22 was 61 per cent (ibid).

Stakeholders in rural transport authorities suggest that provision of better services should have been prioritised before concessionary passes, particularly in rural areas where coverage is poor. This is supported by Transport Scotland data which shows that the adults who are 60-plus and have a concessionary pass who most regularly use it live in urban areas (Transport Scotland 2024a). Similarly, the evaluation of the concessionary scheme for young people found that the benefits were only felt by those who had access to buses (Transport Scotland 2023d). Stakeholders suggested that fare caps might be a fairer way to support people to use the bus.

More widely, the impact of concessionary or capped fares is mixed. In the summer of 2022, Germany capped public transport fares €9 per person per month, significantly reducing the financial barrier to public transport. Some analysis suggested that 10 per cent of people who purchased the ticket swapped at least

11 Up from 2 per cent to eight per cent.

one of their daily car journeys to public transport, and the initiative is claimed to have saved 1.8 million tonnes of CO₂ emissions (VDV 2022). However, other studies found that the impact of the capped fare had only a minimal impact on encouraging a switch from private cars to public transport (Andor 2023). This research suggested that the capped fare merely increased mobility, rather than shifting it away from car use.

It is tempting to conclude that the findings from Germany suggest that provision of affordable public transport alone is not enough to induce a modal shift. But the baseline quantity and quality of the transport are relevant, as is the income of the people using it. Another study of the fare cap found that it meant people living on low incomes were more able to visit relatives, take part in leisure activities and more generally increase their social participation (Rozynek 2024).

3.

INSIGHTS FROM THE PUBLIC

This chapter draws on in-depth interviews and a workshop held over two evenings during February and early March 2024 with members of the public living in rural Scotland on household incomes of under £20,000. Interviews were semi-structured and direct quotes from participants are highlighted. Otherwise, insights are drawn from both interviews and the workshops and, where relevant, other evidence or insights as indicated.

The overwhelming message from participants in this research is that **transport is not working for people living in rural Scotland**. Although there are specific factors, the people we spoke to felt that the failure of the transport system was due to a lack of provision or rising costs. People felt strongly that a car was necessary (even among those who did not themselves drive or own a car), but that this was not necessarily a good thing.

More than one person asked, ‘Why are we discussing transport when there are so many other problems we’re facing?’ The intersection of transport with other indicators of poverty, access to jobs, isolation and other factors was less clear to some participants. This suggests there is a need for the sector to make a strong case that improving transport systems goes beyond just implementing a new bus route or fixing potholes.

People who live in rural areas understand that transport options are likely to be more limited than in cities or other urban areas. Many of the people we interviewed expressed a degree of resignation about the quality of rural public transport, and although they hoped to see it improved, were sceptical about whether it could be delivered. Many had a sense that low ridership and long distances can make it a challenge to operate a rural bus service.

“I chose to live here, so I feel like I can’t complain too much.”

For most participants, even those who did not own or have access to a car, there was a sense that cars were necessary to live a full life in rural areas. Despite this, some of them were resistant to being reliant on a car, either because they were aware of the need to change their behaviour to reduce emissions, or simply because they would rather not need their cars for all journeys.

UNPACKING THE REALITIES OF LIVING IN RURAL SCOTLAND

Participants did not feel that policymakers understood the realities of living rurally. Although some of the insights from members of the public could apply to people living in cities and urban areas, there are specific challenges associated with living rurally. These raise specific issues, but also present opportunities that perhaps would not be appropriate or implementable in urban areas.

Cost of living and the rural premium

Issues: The combination of the cost of living crisis and the rural premium, and the fact that our participants were living on low incomes, meant that almost all of them had suffered from high transport costs.

Opportunities: As the Scottish Affairs Committee identified, there is a need for interventions to address the cost of living to be better targeted and take the rural premium into account (Scottish Affairs Committee 2024).

Our interviews with members of the public revealed that people living on low incomes in rural areas are subject to the rural premium, which applies across fuel (for home heating and cars), bus fares, and the cost of food. Participants talked about there being a lack of options to 'shop around'. Local shops tend to be more expensive, but that means people need to travel further for their weekly shop.

The distances involved contribute to the rural premium. Those who rely on taxis as they cannot drive and do not have buses that go where they need face higher costs than people living in urban areas, simply due to the distances they must travel.

“I’ve noticed the cost of filling a tank going up – that’s why I take the bus all the time, because I’m eligible for free bus travel.”

Driving for work

Issues: For some people, driving is necessary for work. This might be to carry tools, due to time constraints, or a lack of any viable alternatives.

Opportunities: In some cases, businesses could reduce car use by employees through supporting car sharing, or by allowing more time when staff need to travel so they can choose active travel options. Where reducing car use is not possible, these people should be supported to access electric vehicles.

For some of the people we spoke to, the opportunities for reducing their car use during the working day were limited, although they highlighted opportunities for businesses to support car use reduction. Across Scotland, there are examples of businesses taking action to reduce car miles driven, and these could be rolled out further (CoMoUK n.d.). The opportunities to reduce car use are more viable for people who commute into cities or towns, since there are more public transport options.

Carers, who must visit a specific number of patients in a day, discussed having limited time allocated to travel between them. One participant said that although in principle it might be possible to cycle between some visits, the time it would take would reduce that available for caring and would require their employer to change the timings.

Other participants discussed having to carry tools, which would not be possible on public transport, and over distances that would make going by bike challenging. One person told us that they worked on a farm, they needed their vehicle to get over the fields, and there was no option to get to work by any other means.

Buses and other public transport

Issues: Everybody we engaged with during the course of this work discussed the poor quality of the buses. This included lack of regularity, unreliability, inconvenience and expense. There was a sense of frustration in communities affected by the 'Beeching cuts' that they no longer had a rail service.

Opportunities: Many people said they would take the bus if the issues were addressed. Similarly, there was a large amount of enthusiasm for rail, and a desire to see railway lines re-opened. Those who used the park and rides available were very positive about it.

Provision of bus services across Scotland is poor. Participants discussed turning down jobs due to a lack of transport, which meant they were not able to get to work on time. Another had opted to home-school their child due in part to the unreliability of the buses to get them to school, and having no other mode of

transport available. Others said that they were reliant on cars, even if they didn't own them (they use taxis, for example) because the buses were too unreliable and didn't take them where they needed to go.

“My son was offered a job, but there was no way for him to get there because he doesn't drive and the bus wouldn't get him there, so he had to turn it down.”

Concessionary bus passes

Issues: The benefits of the concessionary passes are hindered by poor network coverage, unreliability and patchy timetables.

Opportunities: Improving the quality of the bus service would likely increase ridership.

The concessionary bus passes in Scotland had a mixed reception from the people we spoke to. For some it was a clear motivator for using the bus, but for others the quality of the buses meant that, despite having free bus passes, they preferred to use their cars.

Some of the parents we spoke to said the under-22 bus pass made life easier: it meant they no longer needed to pay for their children's bus fare or drive them to school. One parent questioned why her daughter would need to drive when she can get the bus for free.

“My daughter doesn't need to pay for the bus, so why would she drive?”

However, other parents said that despite the bus pass, they often ended up driving their children to school. This was due to a combination of poor reliability and bad scheduling, with one parent saying that their child arrives at school almost an hour early and has only five minutes at the end of the school day to catch the bus home.

The young people we spoke to discussed the fact that although they had free bus travel, it could mean that a 20-minute car journey would take an hour by bus. Others mentioned that although they did take the bus into the nearest city to go to university or work - 'It's free and you don't have to pay for petrol or parking' - the bus doesn't leave from their village, so they have to drive to the next village in order to catch it.

A similar story plays out among those eligible for the 60-plus bus pass. Those who live within good access of a bus tend to use it, but many said that they did not have access to a bus that worked for them.

“I probably should get the bus because it's free, but it's just so inconvenient!”

“I've got my senior railcard and I'd rather pay a bit more for the train because it's so much more convenient than the bus, even though the bus is free. The train app tells you if it's delayed so you can plan - with the bus you can end up waiting in the cold.”

Active travel

Issues: A lack of adequate infrastructure, from pavements to bike lanes, means that people do not feel safe cycling or, in some cases, walking. Those that might be persuaded to cycle with e-bikes cannot afford the initial outlay to buy one. The long distances and hills mean that some journeys are less accessible by bike or on foot.

Opportunities: Although some participants said they would not cycle regardless, there were many who said they would feel happier walking or cycling if they felt safe doing so.

Although a number of the people we spoke to said they would be very unlikely to cycle, walk or wheel more, many suggested that the reason they did not use those modes of transport was due to poor quality infrastructure and feeling unsafe. Parents of young children discussed their fears of letting their children cycle or walk to the bus stop or to school due to the speed of cars on the road. Others said that the road to their house had no pavement at all, or that where there were pavements, they were too narrow to allow a pushchair to pass along.

“I’d not ride a bike, especially not with my kids, I’d be worried about keeping my daughter safe. I don’t really like to walk down the roads because the pavements are too narrow, and the verges haven’t been cut.”

The distances and hills were frequently cited as a barrier to walking or cycling, except for leisure. However, others discussed recently having bought an e-bike and how much they enjoyed using it on holidays. One participant said that if they had an e-bike they would be more likely to use it.

“If I won an electric bike in a competition, I’d definitely ride it! There’s a disused railway path near here that’s popular with cyclists and I’d go on that.”

The mental load of living rurally

Issues: Almost everyone we engaged with discussed the need to think carefully about their travel before setting off. For some, this was just making sure they timed their arrival at the stop to avoid missing the bus. For others, this included considerations of adverse weather, coordinating their children, not wanting to walk alone at night, working out how to get to the shop that sells what they need, or making sure they made it to the supermarket. Everybody mentioned having to think carefully before setting off.

Opportunities: Increasing reliability, frequency and affordability of public transport options would reduce the concerns some residents face.

People living rurally do not have uniform experiences or needs. Although the role of community was an important element of living in remote and rural areas, almost every person that we engaged with discussed their community, including how and where they engaged with others, differently.

“You’ve got to be organised to get your deliveries and make sure you don’t run out. You can manage without a car but you can’t just ‘pop’ out – our local shop closed a few years ago so if I run out I just have to make do, especially if you’ve not got money for a taxi.”

However, for people with friends or family who do not live in their immediate village, maintaining those relationships can be more challenging. The young people we spoke to discussed needing to travel further to see friends, often between villages that do not have bus connections. One participant said that in order to buy the ingredients she needs to cook she would have to take two buses to get to the African food shops in the nearest city. She also said that getting to her preferred church is not possible on the bus because it does not arrive in time. Instead, she offers lift-shares and picks up other church attendees on the drive into the city.

“Leaving the village is like a military operation! You have to plan things down to the minute to make sure you don’t miss the bus.”

Shifting travel behaviours and attitudes

Interestingly, even among the participants who drove a lot and were sceptical about the need to reduce car use - or the ways in which to do it - there was a sense that there were more cars on the road than there used to be, and that this wasn't a good thing.

“We used to have one car for the whole family when I was a kid, and we’d make it work! Now you see houses with three or even four cars – and no one wants to share.”

Many of the older participants reflected on the fact that access to cars had increased, and most households have more cars now than when they were children. The increased access through finance, particularly for young people, concerned some participants who were worried about both the cost and the patterns of behaviour that it was creating – even if every person in their own household had a car.

Attitudes to car sharing varied significantly. While some participants were vehemently opposed to it, others liked car sharing with friends, either to go shopping or to a social event. Others, although they didn't like car sharing, were more than happy to run errands for neighbours while out in their own car.

Attitudes to electric vehicles (EVs) varied, but almost everyone we spoke to agreed that they were out of reach financially. There were participants who said, however, that if they were 'given one tomorrow' they'd be delighted, since it would reduce costs. Island residents discussed the high level of charging provision on the island as something that might reassure them if they were to get an EV.

Reflections on car use reduction initiatives

No one we spoke to was aware of any car use reduction initiatives taking place in their local areas, although some had seen cycle infrastructure. This low awareness may be due to the lack of understanding of what 'reducing car use' means. Many people assumed it meant never driving again or getting rid of their car. There was a general scepticism about the Scottish government's objective to reduce car traffic, with people saying that 'it sounds good on paper, but how will you achieve it?'

Despite this scepticism, many of the people we spoke to had reduced their car use recently. For some, this has been due to the cost of living crisis and represented an overall reduction in mobility. This highlights the risk of focussing only on reducing car miles, and not on the access residents have to other transport options.

Some people had adopted multi-modal transport habits that were likely a direct result of initiatives aimed at reducing car use, without linking them together. The clearest example of this was the people we spoke to who, when they need to go into the nearest city, will drive to the park and ride then take the bus into the city centre:

“The cycle lanes, parking charges and fines for pollution mean it's not worth it. The park and ride is so much easier anyway, it takes you right to the centre of town.”

This highlights two lessons when implementing car use reduction initiatives. The first is that multi-modal trips that involve some driving can still be linked to an overall reduction in car miles driven, and should be encouraged where possible, particularly in rural areas. The second is that interventions should be designed

that make alternative options desirable in their own right, and should be in place *before* introducing charging measures such as parking fees or clean air zones.

Transport in the wider context

Given the current cost of living crisis, it was not possible to talk to people living on low incomes without discussing the current cost of transport. As outlined in section 2, there is a strong link between transport poverty and other forms of poverty, and this emerged in the interviews we conducted.

Many people mentioned that they had changed their travel behaviours to reduce the cost of travel, a finding that is supported by IPPR's polling on the same topic (Frost and Singer Hobbs 2024). People mentioned trip-chaining (such as stopping at the supermarket on the way home from work) to minimise the miles driven, car sharing, or going to different petrol stations to reduce cost.

Beyond the cost of living, other factors were raised as relevant to the transport context.

For example, many participants identified that it is not possible to solve transport without addressing other issues, particularly housing and the job market, or that solving transport problems without sorting housing or jobs would not improve lives. This included the building of homes without public transport links (Transport for New Homes 2022) or the lack of affordable housing causing people to move further away from work.

“They’re building loads of homes near my village, but most of those people will have to commute into Glasgow for work. The bus takes ages so most people will drive – it’s frustrating that they closed the railway we used to have into the city. And it just seems silly - how will they reduce car use if they’re not giving us any other options?”

These issues were particularly raised by islanders, who discussed the rising cost of living being unmatched by wages. They were exacerbated by the particularly scarce nature of living on the islands (jobs, homes, infrastructure more broadly). The National Islands Plan, drawn up by the Scottish government (2023b), identified the interconnected nature of these issues and outlined a commitment to address the lack of affordable housing on the islands. However, despite committing £25 million to the Rural Affordable Homes for Key Workers fund in 2023, it had not delivered any homes nine months after the programme was announced (Hay 2024).

WHERE NEXT? PERCEPTIONS OF DECISION MAKERS

The sense that rural transport was not prioritised, and that there were no opportunities for meaningful engagement, had led many participants to have very low trust in government. To deliver the transformation in the transport system needed to meet net zero targets and reduce car use, this trust will need to be rebuilt. This goes beyond practical solutions about new buses or more funding for cycle lanes, although those play an important role. The individuals we spoke to for this project are not alone. Recent polling done across Great Britain by IPPR found that local councils are more trusted than national government to improve the transport system (Frost and Singer Hobbs 2024).

Through our in-depth interviews and the workshop, two themes emerged which if addressed, might help rebuild trust: prioritisation of rural transport and meaningful engagement combined with transparency.

Rural transport as a priority, not an afterthought

Beyond the specific challenges with decarbonising rural transport, there are concerns that without a specific strategy in place for rural transport, these

areas will be left behind (Edwards et al 2023). These concerns are borne out in interviews with members of the public, who expressed feelings that rural populations are ‘considered an afterthought’.

“The further north you go in Scotland, the more it feels like the government has forgotten you – they’ve got great transport in Edinburgh and Glasgow, what have we got here?”

These feelings are exacerbated by investment decisions. One participant discussed the fact that until recently, the buses on their island were sent there to ‘retire’ after their use in mainland cities.

“Why should we feel proud or want to take the bus when we’re getting the rest of Scotland’s hand-me-downs?”

This manifests in a distrust of government, particularly of politicians in the Scottish parliament. Local councillors are perceived to be more trusted, not least because they are seen to live in the communities that they are designing interventions for, and in some communities have been seen to be publicly fighting for better transport services.

Meaningful engagement and transparency

Many of the people we spoke to were aware of the Scottish government’s objective to reduce car use, although some were less clear on how the government intended to reach this target. Participants were also very conscious of any perceived hypocrisy of government officials arguing for a reduction in car miles to reduce emissions, while driving or flying around themselves. Beyond the national target, there was a strong sense that more could be done to communicate changes to local transport systems. Participants felt that engaging people through a range of different mediums (for example, local radio, leafleting, social media, and others) would mean that everyone would have an opportunity to engage. One person suggested that beyond voting, it felt as if there were limited opportunities to be involved.

“People in government are living in their ivory towers – they don’t understand what life is like for people living in the country!”

“I was always taught to lead by example, but the government aren’t doing that!”

Many were keen to have more opportunities to engage with the decision-making process. They felt that there was a lack of meaningful engagement with the people who are most impacted by decisions around transport.

Anchor institutions such as local shops or GP practices are likely to be helpful for disseminating information and engaging with members of rural communities. Additionally, in small communities where people know each other well, word of mouth is likely to play an important role. Local councillors are often known to residents and tend to be more trusted than other government officials or MSPs.

The insights we collected from the public can be broadly grouped into three categories: getting around in rural Scotland, meeting people where they are, and issues that go beyond transport. They have been grouped with the corresponding recommendation in table 3.1.

TABLE 3.1: INSIGHTS FROM THE PUBLIC GROUPED BY OVERARCHING CATEGORY, AND THE RECOMMENDATION(S) TO ADDRESS IT

Insights from the public		Recommendations
Getting around in rural Scotland	Driving for work	EV and e-bike grant schemes
	Buses and other public transport	Bus franchising Transport hubs, anchor towns and multimodal travel Ensuring delivery of socially and economically necessary bus routes Fare caps and passes for people living on low incomes
	Active travel	Active travel infrastructure within and between rural communities Reduction of speed limits EV and e-bike grants and loans
Meeting people where they are	Cost of living and the rural premium	Income support for people living rurally
	The mental load of living rurally	Income support for people living rurally Local public services Transport hubs, anchor towns, multimodal travel
	Shifting behaviours and attitudes	Public engagement
	Meaningful engagement and transparency	Funding for local authorities, transport Scotland and regional transport authorities to carry out public engagement
	Reflections on car use reduction initiatives	Meaningful public engagement Government strategy with a credible delivery plan that outlines how emissions reductions will be achieved in rural areas
Strategic approaches	Transport in the wider context	Transport hubs, anchor towns, multimodal travel
	Rural transport as a priority not an afterthought	Government strategy with a credible delivery plan that outlines how emissions reductions will be achieved in rural areas

4.

PRINCIPLES FOR ACTION

The principles are drawn from the workshop held over two evenings in March 2024. The 11 panellists all lived on a low income and in a rural community in Scotland. Over two evenings, they heard each other's perspectives, received presentations from Poverty Alliance and Transport Scotland, and had the opportunity to reflect on our interpretations of the interviews and focus group. They then discussed the following question:

“How should a reduction in car miles across Scotland be achieved in a way that is fair to people living in rural areas?”

The principles detailed below are their answer to that question. We have kept as closely as possible to the words our panellists used. The principles take as given that the Scottish government must take action to reach net zero through rapid emissions reduction. The members of the public we spoke to generally understood the need for action on climate change, although the degree to which this was a priority for them varied.

Panellists struggled to reach consensus on which of the principles should be prioritised. Some felt very strongly that infrastructure first should be prioritised, while others felt that action should be taken first by those most able to make changes. We would advocate that the principles will be most effective if implemented together.

Action should be taken first by those who are most able to make changes: this includes people who are wealthy and/or live in cities, and people who make unnecessary car journeys.

The postcode lottery of services in rural Scotland means that there are some people who are much more able to make changes. Those who could make changes to their travel patterns without losing access to services should do so first and importantly, should be *seen* to be making those changes. Panellists used the example of households that have multiple cars, or people who drive for very short journeys.

People in positions of power (political, financial or otherwise) should lead the way: decision makers and businesses must be seen to be making changes to reduce their emissions.

As identified in section 3, there is a need to rebuild trust in government. Politicians being seen to make changes in their lives will help rebuild this trust and show that they are taking this seriously. Panellists were alive to hypocrisy - for example, more than one mentioned politicians flying when there were viable train routes.

There are clear actions people in power can be taking to show their commitment and lead the way. These include: national government to provide subsidies for local public transport; local government to identify local need; transport authorities to deliver services; bus companies to improve the standard of buses. Panellists also felt that big businesses were not doing enough to meet their emissions targets, or incentivising staff to do so. They discussed interventions such as rewards for staff who car-share on their commute, and preventing excess business travel.

Infrastructure first: for people to make changes, there need to be viable alternatives, and people need to feel that they have a choice which goes beyond just car ownership or buses.

Buses (and other services) should meet minimum service levels and be adapted for different places. We cannot expect or ask people to make changes that are impossible or unaffordable. People living rurally have lower public transport access and will generally live further from essential public services.

The aim should be to make the transport system fairer: this means that while some will have to reduce their car use, others will see their mobility increase.

People living in rural areas need more mobility options, not fewer. Rather than 'reducing car use' the aim should be to reduce emissions while making the transport system work better for everyone. This should include incentivising actions people are already taking that result in a reduction of emissions such as car sharing.

Engagement: the needs of people living in rural areas vary significantly, and those who will be impacted should have an opportunity for meaningful engagement.

Panellists discussed that what might be appropriate on the islands might not be applicable to the highlands or the borders. Decision makers must consult and meaningfully engage with those who will have to make changes to their lives. There is also a need to ensure engagement occurs throughout the project life cycle: during the design phase, proposals, initial implementation, and ongoing monitoring. There was a sense that engagement was a 'tick-box' exercise that did not constitute 'meaningful' engagement.

Engaging with rural residents can be challenging due to large distances, and poor transport systems and internet connectivity. Panellists felt quite strongly that engagement should be broad and provided in multiple different formats and styles, for example by using social media to reach younger people, leaflets or door knocking, drop-in centres and online forms.

Affordability: public transport must be made more affordable to ensure it is accessible to those living on low incomes.

The cost of public transport was a barrier to a number of panelists. Supporting people to make 'greener' choices should not leave them out of pocket. They discussed how having to change buses to get to your destination could mean paying for multiple fares, all of which add up.

5.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

People living on low incomes in rural Scotland understand that there is a need for the transport system to change. Although there is support for action on climate change, this is conditional on it being seen to be implemented fairly, and not falling on people who already have limited options to make changes in their lives, while others can avoid making changes at all.

Most of the people we engaged with feel dependent on cars – either their own or by using taxis to get around if they are unable to drive or do not own a car. Many participants discussed supporting neighbours who do not own cars, either through collecting shopping for them or offering lifts. There was an almost universal wish to see better buses - more reliable, frequent and with increased network coverage. Attitudes to active travel were more mixed, but safety was raised most frequently as a barrier to increased walking or cycling.

Participants felt strongly that it was unfair to ask people to change their behaviour without providing alternatives, and were conscious of any perceived hypocrisy. However, they did feel that increasing the transport options available to them would make life easier.

These findings are in line with many other studies of rural transport. Transport for the North identified the following themes in their work on rural transport: rural car dependency, barriers to active travel, mixed levels of bus use, relatively low levels of rail use (TftN 2023). These broadly correlate with findings in this work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

People living in rural areas are already suffering from poor transport connectivity compared with those living in urban areas. **Interventions to reduce car use in rural areas should avoid punitive measures, and focus instead on increasing connectivity** and transport options available to people living rurally. Interventions should consider the principles outlined in section 4 to ensure implementation and delivery is fair and considerate of the needs of those living on low incomes rurally.

Recommendations fall into two categories: those for the Scottish government and those for local authorities or local transport authorities.

SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

The role for Scottish government in achieving a reduction in car kilometres, while ensuring people living rurally are not left behind, is predominantly about setting a clear direction of travel and ensuring local transport authorities are provided with sufficient funding to deliver.

The Scottish government, in conjunction with Transport Scotland, must set out a credible delivery plan for reducing transport emissions by 2030 and beyond, with a clear focus on ensuring a just transition.

Scotland is off-track to deliver its emissions reductions targets. There is a need for a plan that outlines exactly how these reductions will be achieved, while ensuring a just transition for rural communities. The plan must ensure it delivers the benefits of a shift to a greener and more accessible transport system to all, which will involve tailoring interventions to different areas of Scotland.

The delivery plan should outline clearly what a 20 per cent reduction in car use means for different parts of Scotland and how this will be achieved. Promoting multimodal trips as a way of reducing but not completely removing car use might be an option for rural areas.

Local authorities and local transport authorities must be provided with adequate funding. This funding should cover the following.

- **Local public services:** reducing the need to travel and addressing ‘living well locally’.
Investment in local public services forms part of the Scottish government strategy to address depopulation, which includes community delivery (Scottish government 2024). However, there is an opportunity to tackle rural depopulation, reduce car kilometres through ‘living well locally’, and improve transport connectivity through identifying a series of anchor towns and communities. These anchor towns can act as transport hubs that provide essential public services to people living rurally, and to reduce the need for people to travel further to access public services. This will include, for example, addressing the reduction in GP surgeries in Scotland. This funding could be delivered through the Scottish government Rural & Island Communities Ideas into Action (RICIA) fund (Scottish government 2023c).
- **Buses:** ensuring the delivery of socially and economically necessary bus routes. The Scottish government should increase investment in buses, including reversing the recent cut to the Bus Partnership Fund (Transform Scotland 2024), and delivering on the actions outlined in the ‘Fair Fares Review’ to address rising costs (Transport Scotland 2024b). Buses should ensure they meet the needs of multiple users, including tourists and others who are not local to the areas the buses serve.
- **Electric vehicles and e-bikes:** where reducing car use is not possible or appropriate, access to EVs and e-bikes should be facilitated for those living on low incomes, and EV charging roll-out should be accelerated.
Scotland should build on its success with EV-charging infrastructure roll-out to help those who cannot reduce their car use to access EVs. This should be facilitated through dedicated resources to support rural communities - for example, through loans or grants, social leasing schemes or car clubs for electric vehicles and E-bikes. This has been recently called for by the charity Possible, which is advocating for a social leasing scheme for rural care workers to support them to access electric vehicles (Possible 2024).
- **Meaningful public engagement:** identify the needs of communities and deliver a tailored transport system that works for local people
Local authorities, Transport Scotland and regional transport authorities should receive adequate funding to carry out meaningful public engagement, which is essential to ensure people feel that policies are being done ‘with and by them’ rather than to them (IPPR Environmental Justice Commission 2021). This should form part of Scottish government commitments to ‘place based’ policymaking, for example through the establishment of regular representative deliberative processes or of forums where policies and ideas can be discussed. These groups should include those whose voices are usually underrepresented in decision-

making processes - for example, people living on low incomes, people from minority ethnic groups, people with disabilities, and people living on low incomes.

- **The Scottish government should deliver a fare cap on bus travel and extend concessionary fares to those in receipt of universal credit and equivalent means-tested benefits.**

Concessionary fares should be expanded to those living on the lowest incomes, as has previously been called for by IPPR Scotland, who suggested public transport be viewed as a universal basic service (Statham 2022), and by Poverty Alliance who called for an expansion of eligibility for those living on low incomes to receive free bus travel (Poverty Alliance 2024).

The Scottish government should carry out modelling to identify the cost of implementing a fare cap across the whole bus network. The modelling should investigate the cost of replacing concessionary fares with a capped daily fare (for example £1), with the money saved used to deliver further services for rural areas. This should build on findings from the Fair Fares Review.

LOCAL AUTHORITY RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations at a local level focus more on delivery of services.

- **Local transport authorities should consider using the powers granted under Section 34 of the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 to carry out franchising of bus services.**

The Transport Select Committee endorsed franchising as a way for local transport authorities to be more explicit about the services they want (Transport Committee 2023). The 2019 Act (Transport Scotland 2019) gave local transport authorities the ability to franchise bus services. Local transport authorities across Scotland can learn from the Strathclyde Transport Partnership, which is in the process of franchising bus services in Glasgow and across the region. Local transport authorities should also support local communities to run demand responsive transport (DRT) or community transport services.

- **Anchor towns and villages should act as transport hubs, facilitating multi-modal travel and showcasing best practice as demonstrators.** Exemplar villages and towns should support others to adopt successful interventions.

Anchor towns have a key role to play in meeting the 'living well locally' ambition and addressing social isolation, as outlined by the Scottish government. Anchor towns should be part of an integrated network that links rural settlements to each other and to urban centres. They should ensure passengers can easily get between different modes of transport - for example between train stations and ferry ports - and transport hubs should include access to electric vehicles and e-bikes. This is in line with recommendations made by others to promote multimodal journeys as a way of reducing car miles in rural areas (Prosser et al 2022). Identification of anchor towns and villages can also act as demonstrator towns, showcasing best practice for active travel or car reduction measures.

- **Active travel infrastructure should be improved within and between rural communities, and speed limits should be lowered in residential areas.**

The continued commitment to invest in active travel is welcome (Transform Scotland 2024). This should be used to ensure that pavements within villages are wide enough to be accessible to those in wheelchairs or with pushchairs. Bus stops should be safely accessible on foot or by bike, and there should be adequate multi-modal provision – for example, the provision of bike locks at bus stops. Speed limits should be reduced and enforced around residential rural areas to ensure residents feel safe getting around (Olowosegun et al 2023).

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The image features a minimalist design with a light green background. A large, dark blue shape, resembling a stylized letter 'L' or a bracket, is positioned on the right side. The top edge of this blue shape is curved, and it extends downwards to a horizontal line. From the left end of this horizontal line, a vertical line descends to a lower horizontal line. The bottom edge of the entire composition is a smooth, upward-curving arc in the light green color.

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