

RETHINKING TRANSPORT SERVICES TO TACKLE POVERTY

Briefing from The Poverty Alliance

16 October 2018

1. About the Poverty Alliance.

The Poverty Alliance is the national anti-poverty network in Scotland, with over 230 members drawn from the voluntary and public sectors, trade unions, researchers, faith groups and individuals with direct experience of poverty.

We have a number of key policy areas that provide the focus for our activities; addressing low incomes, supporting services to reduce poverty, enhancing the participation of people with direct experience of poverty in policy development processes, and addressing attitudes to poverty.

2. Transport and poverty.

Poverty can be solved by boosting incomes and reducing costs, and transport is vital in supporting efforts to do both. Recognised by *Every Child, Every Chance*¹ – the Scottish Government’s delivery plan for tackling child poverty – as a key component in efforts to meet the poverty reduction targets set by the Child Poverty Act, transport helps to enable access to employment opportunities, education, and essential services.

Yet too often, people on low incomes are prevented from accessing these opportunities and services due to affordability and availability issues; something that can both contribute towards and intensify the experience of poverty. Indeed, Sustrans research found that over 1 million people in Scotland were living in areas at high risk of ‘transport poverty’.²

3. Barriers to transport faced by people on low incomes.

From the Poverty Alliance’s extensive community engagement experience, we know that issues around transport are of critical concern to people on low incomes. These issues include:

Affordability

The cost of transport – and particularly bus services – is an issue that is repeatedly raised by people experiencing poverty. Too often people on low

incomes are prevented from accessing transport due to cost, or have no choice but to spend large proportions of their incomes on transport.

While concessionary travel schemes are available for some groups, it is clear from our experience that the majority of people on low incomes are unable to access these schemes. For example, research that we undertook in Aberdeenshire found limited awareness of the Jobcentre Plus Discount Card. There are also relatively limited criteria for access to this card, with many people experiencing poverty not qualifying and therefore being unable to access concessionary fares.

Service coverage

As well as the cost, the availability of bus services is a second major barrier faced by people on low incomes, who often live in areas that are either under-served or not at all served by bus services.

While the problems of route coverage are acute for people living in rural areas, they also exist in urban areas. The Poverty Alliance facilitated a recent discussion – as part of our *Get Heard Scotland* initiative – at a community group in Easterhouse, Glasgow in which participants spoke of how – while bus services are available in the community – many of them do not run on routes that would provide them with access to the services and facilities that they need. This prevents them from accessing the same opportunities as others in society.

4. Impact of barriers to transport.

Through our engagement with communities affected by poverty, we know of the impact which affordability and availability factors can have, including:

Increased risk of social isolation and difficulties maintaining social connections

For people experiencing poverty, transport services – and particularly bus services – are critical to maintaining social connections. Yet due to the high cost of travel and lack of coverage in some –

particularly rural – areas, people on low incomes can find it difficult to maintain these connections and can be at increased risk of social isolation. This is something with a particularly pronounced impact on people who can already be at greater risk of experiencing mental health issues.

Limiting of access to employment opportunities

Low paid jobs often involve early or late shift work, with the modern labour market increasingly also involving insecure and irregular work. People in this type of employment require a flexible and affordable transport system that meets their needs, but we know that often this is not available to them.

As a result, high transport costs limit the employment opportunities available to people. Recent work undertaken by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation underlined this, finding that people in neighbourhoods associated with low income are willing to travel for employment, but find their options restricted by unaffordable or unreliable public transport, particularly when combined with the likelihood of that employment being low paid or insecure.³

Access to services

Access to high quality public services such as health, education, social security and childcare services, is essential in tackling poverty. Yet – due to unaffordable, unreliable or unavailable transport – these services can often be inaccessible or are only accessible at high cost.

This issue is of particular concern in rural areas, where dispersed services mean that individuals are often forced to spend significant amounts of their low incomes in order to access their rights and utilise public services.

5. Using the Transport Bill & NTS Review to tackle poverty.

The Transport Bill and the National Transport Strategy Review have – as identified in *Every Child, Every Chance* – an important role to play in meeting poverty reduction targets.

It is welcome that the National Transport Strategy Review includes within its remit consideration of how transport can be used to reduce inequality. It is important that these considerations involve people with experience of poverty, in order to ensure that the strategy best meets their needs and acts in support of efforts to tackle poverty.

It is also welcome that the Transport Bill provides local authorities with additional powers over bus services in their area, and we believe that this has the potential to address ongoing market failures of affordability and coverage and ensure that people on low incomes are better served.

There is scope, though, to strengthen the Bill by making more explicit the importance of high quality, affordable bus services to people on low incomes, and to recognise the role that access to affordable transport has to play in poverty reduction. This could be done in a number of ways, for example by:

- Including within the requirements of Bus Service Improvement Plans the additional requirement of detailing how the measures proposed will contribute towards the reduction of poverty and/or better meet the needs of people on low incomes.
- Making provision within the Bill for expanded concessionary travel schemes, particularly for people on low incomes.

Together, the Bill and the Review offer an opportunity to rethink how we deliver transport services in Scotland in a way that meets the needs of everyone. By taking steps to make our transport services more affordable, accessible and responsive to communities associated with poverty, we can ensure that transport supports rather than restricts the lives of people on low incomes, and ensure that it acts in support of efforts to loosen the grip of poverty on people's lives.

¹ Scottish Government (March 2018), *Every Child Every Chance: The Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2018-2022*, <https://www.gov.scot/Resource/0053/00533606.pdf>

² Sustrans (August 2016), *Transport Poverty in Scotland*, https://www.sustrans.org.uk/sites/default/files/file_content_type/transport_poverty_in_scotland_report.pdf

³ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (August 2018), *Tackling transport-related barriers to work in Scotland*, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/tackling-transport-related-barriers-employment-low-income-neighbourhoods>

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We campaign for walking, cycling and public transport to be the easiest and most affordable options for everyone. Our diverse membership brings together public, private and third sector organisations from across Scotland. We are a registered Scottish charity (SC041516).