

PART FOUR: WEALTH & ECONOMY

Is free transport the solution for society's poorest?

Inadequate transport provision always seems to hit those in poverty the hardest. It is time to re-evaluate our priorities, says **Laura Laker**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Laker is a freelance journalist with 10 years' experience writing on cycling, active travel and, more recently, micromobility for national and specialist titles. She is also working with the University of Westminster's Active Travel Academy – a new mobility think tank.

Transport is key for us to access education, employment, healthcare and other basic services and needs. However, as we know from previous articles in this series, access to transport in the UK is far from equal, and that disparity also applies across different income groups.

According to the Office for National Statistics (2019), in 2018, 7.8% of the UK population – roughly 4.6 million people – were in persistent poverty, i.e. a low household income for that year and at least two of the three preceding years – a rise of 0.5% in two years.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation found 1.5 million people were destitute in 2017, including 365,000 children – i.e. unable to afford basics such as heat and regular meals, or beds and bedding.

A survey of frontline workers in 2019 by poverty grants charity Buttle found a growing number of people are in this last category, with one worker saying “often families do not even have the bus fare to travel to the food bank”.

Meanwhile, public transport investment has suffered erosion by successive governments. According to analysis by BBC Panorama in 2019, more than half a million people now live at least a mile from a bus stop with a regular service, and although the Government pledged £5 billion over five years for buses and cycling early in 2020, this was against an annual funding cut of £800m, across a decade.

A statement by Professor Philip Alston, UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, following a visit to the UK in 2018, read “rural dwellers are particularly impacted by cuts to transportation and public services, are at a higher risk of loneliness and isolation, and often face higher fuel costs”. He surmised policies to cut services supporting those in the greatest need were political decisions, not economic necessity.

One interviewee quoted in the report told Alston: “If you’re poor in the countryside it’s twice as bad, because you don’t have access to services. People can’t

afford the bus and the bus doesn’t go where you need it to anyways.”

Alston added a lack of access to transport prevented jobseekers reaching places of work, saying, “one person told me that it was easier for her to go to find a job by travelling to another city and staying with friends than it would have been to find a job at home without public transportation”.

Costs have not risen equally across transport modes, meanwhile. According to then transport minister, Andrew Jones, in response to a parliamentary question in 2015, between 1980 and 2014 bus and coach fares increased by 58% and rail fares increased by 63% in real terms – while the real cost of motoring declined by 14%. Analysis of household expenditure figures in the UK for 2017 revealed transport accounts for the greatest proportion of household budgets.

For the poorest in society, a family car is still unaffordable, however. A 2017 report by University College London’s (UCL) Social Prosperity Network, titled Social Prosperity for the Future: a proposal ➤



► for universal basic services, explores ways to reduce inequality and improve quality of life by broadening access to public services.

The report found "mobility and accessibility inequalities are highly correlated with social disadvantage", with car owners and 'main drivers' in households making more and longer trips for all journey purposes than anyone else in society.

Meanwhile 40% of those in the lowest income households had no access to a car, with women, children, older people, black and minority ethnic and disabled people far more likely to be in this group.

The report noted bus use is in decline for all but the lowest income groups, who remain most dependent on both buses and walking, although walking levels are also falling.

The poorest in society also suffer the worst health-related externalities of transport, including air pollution and road danger.

Although income plays a part in transport access, Karen Lucas, professor of Human Geography at the University of Manchester, says this is "not necessarily a problem of income, but one of the delivery of public transport services, particularly buses" – and she says it's a problem that also blights communities in the peripheries of larger cities.

"You could almost say that, outside of the city centres, public transport doesn't really serve the majority."

This boils down to land-use planning – and attitudes towards the value of, and right to, transport, says Lucas. The UCL report echoes this: "Public transport service limitations, combined with largely unregulated land-use development, are driving a mobility culture that most advantages already highly-mobile and well-off sections of the population, while worsening the mobility and accessibility opportunities of the most socially disadvantaged in the UK."

In some European countries, such as France, transport is not seen as, or required to be, a profit-making endeavour, because the externalised good for society is recognised. In the UK, this attitude has declined in recent decades.

French businesses contribute to transport services via taxation, in recognition of the implicit benefit of staff being able to get to work reliably and on time.

In terms of land use planning, Dutch and

Swedish officials ensure new housing or business developments tie in with new or existing public transport links. This kind of planning is absent in Britain's developments, aside from ensuring road access, with social housing often plonked on the periphery of urban centres, on unwanted land.

Lucas says this is not new: "People have been saying the same things since I was writing my PhD thesis in 1994... (that solutions are): planned and integrated services, planned and integrated fares and ticketing, and informatics" – the latter being readily available information on service timings and regularity.

Added to this, she says, "because the local authorities aren't in control of the services, the bus companies have been allowed to pretty much do what they want".

Other countries, meanwhile, have come up with "hybrid solutions", including demand-responsive transport, or minibuses for "less commercial areas". In the UK, community-led rather than Government-funded bus schemes have stepped in to fill the void, but these are the exception, not the rule, and rely on a community with the various necessary resources to initiate and maintain such programmes.

Meanwhile, a vicious cycle of degrading service levels driving down ridership, which reduces profitability for private companies, risks making buses a "twilight service", which Lucas says is "not really fit for purpose for anybody, but it's still costing a lot", via public subsidies to private companies.

Andrew Percy, director of the Social Prosperity Network, Institute for Global Prosperity, at UCL, and one of the authors of the Social Prosperity report, argues providing access to essential services should be viewed differently.

He says: "The big picture is that developed societies have sets of needs from the people that live in them. Whether we need or fund those is not a political choice, once we have developed society to a certain point.



As a society, we either sustain that level of development, sophistication and complexity, or we decide...to go backwards.

"Transferring responsibility of meeting those needs to the individual doesn't remove those needs, it just transfers them from the collective to the private. Then the only people that get access are the ones lucky enough to have good incomes so, inevitably, you get rises in inequality."

IMPACTS OF TRANSPORT INEQUALITY

Transport inequalities begin to manifest before we are born, with higher levels of air pollution associated with lower cognitive performance, low birthweight babies and even stillbirth, to respiratory illness and premature death later in life.

An estimated five million children in the UK live in poverty – and those children are more likely to have poor physical health and experience mental health problems, underachieve at school and have employment difficulties in adult life, according to the Children's Society.

Those in lower-income neighbourhoods rely more heavily on walking, but are more likely to have hazardous environments for walking and cycling, with busy roads and high levels of pavement parking – threatening environments that also negatively impact mental health.

Sustrans Scotland found children in the

country's 20% most deprived areas are in excess of three times more likely to be involved in a traffic collision than those in its 20% least deprived areas.

John Lauder, former Sustrans Scotland national director, called this a 'double injustice' for Scotland's poorest communities. He says: "First, communities are locked out of opportunities through transport poverty. Second, children in those communities are at three times higher risk of death or injury while out walking or cycling, simply due to their postcode."

Single parents on low incomes can struggle to get children to childcare and after-school activities, a pattern that continues post-16, both in terms of public transport scarcity and with prohibitive insurance costs for young drivers.

According to the British Youth Council "the cost of public transport fares is the biggest issue for young people, hindering access to employment, education, training, and their local communities".

Journey times have a huge impact, too – with a 10% reduction in bus travel times to jobs in England predicted to provide a 0.2% increase in employment (50,000 extra jobs).

While subsidies for young person's bus travel are limited by local authority budgets, services for older people are protected by national statute, and at any age can provide key social opportunities, both in transport itself and the activities it enables.

71%

of parents would have to cut back on living expenses if they lost free travel, says research from the Child Poverty Action Group

In London, there is an ongoing battle to save free travel in the city for 11-17-year-olds, with the 'zip card'. Originally intended to be cut as part of a Covid funding deal with national government from the autumn, there was a recent reprieve until spring.

Research in 2020 by the Child Poverty Action Group found almost three-quarters of young people used their zip card to get to school or college, and cutting free travel would not only limit their options for further education but would impact on how safe they felt getting to school or college, and would result in fewer trips to museums and shops, and friends and family. It found 71% of parents would have to cut back on living expenses if they lost free travel, and 41% would cut back on food.

In 2014, the Liverpool City Region introduced MyTicket, allowing young people, aged five-15 to travel all day on the bus network for £2 – which was later extended to under-18s. Merseyside is an area with high levels of deprivation and more than a third of households have no access to a car.

In the first year, 1.6 million tickets were sold, with the project becoming financially sustainable after 12 months, thanks to the additional trips made as part of the scheme, despite the reduction in fares.

A Liverpool City Region spokesperson said: "Since its launch, MyTicket has helped to deliver an uplift in youth bus patronage of 168%, bucking the national trend ►



► of falling passenger numbers.”

In 2018, the Metro Mayor of the Liverpool City Region launched the Apprentice Travelcard, offering half-price bus and rail season tickets to all under-25s in the city region enrolled on accredited apprenticeships. Officials estimate those eligible could save more than £400 a year on bus travel and up to £680 on rail travel.

The spokesperson adds: “Apprenticeships are a vital pathway to work for young people across the Liverpool City Region, leading to skilled and well-paid jobs. But we understood that the cost of travel, particularly for those from low income households, was preventing some young people from taking up apprenticeship opportunities.”

TRANSPORT AS AN ESSENTIAL SERVICE

One of UN Rapporteur Dr Alston’s recommendations was that transport, especially in rural areas, should be considered “an essential service, equivalent to water and electricity” with Government regulation ensuring rural residents were adequately served.

He concludes: “Abandoning people to the private market in relation to a service that affects every dimension of their basic well-being is incompatible with human rights requirements.”

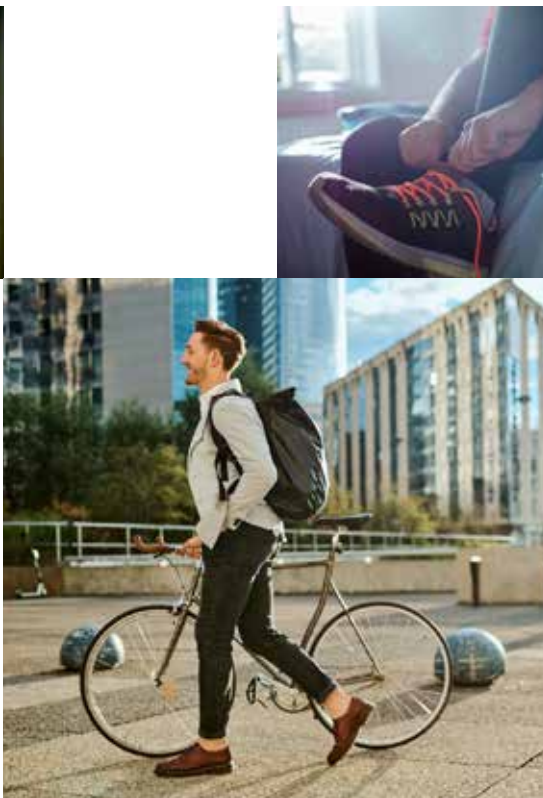
This could mean making transport, or at least public transport, a basic service that is free or subsidised for some or all of the population, as proposed in the UCL report.

Based on universal basic income (UBI), universal basic services is a concept to provide an “enhanced social safety net”.

In the report’s introduction, professor Henrietta L Moore, director of the UCL institute for global prosperity, describes poverty as the gap between available income and the cost of basic living.

She writes: “Basic services will reduce poverty because they will reduce the cost of a minimum living standard. Even if income levels remain static, it will make accessible a life that includes participation, builds belonging and common purpose and potentially strengthens the cohesion of society as a whole.”

One of these basic services, she argues, is transport.



The report examines a specific measure: expanding the freedom pass, currently available for over-60s, to everyone for bus services. The premise is it would help people access jobs, education, healthcare and to participate in their community.

Assuming an increase in usage of 260%, the report estimates a cost of £5bn per year. The benefits are most pronounced for those on the lowest incomes.

It seems a big leap to return to a public transport standard that would make buses attractive and viable again, but Percy argues it’s relative.

“I think those are political choices when we ask the cost of something. If we were factoring in environmental costs and externalities, there’s no way you would say that running around in a private petrol- or diesel-driven car is the cost-effective alternative.

“There are certain things in life you know simply don’t make sense to make a lot of money out of. We’ve already decided making money out of healthcare, or sewerage, isn’t something that we want at the centre of our economy.”



He says this is more about finding the best transport solution, than buses specifically, i.e. “How do people get to hospital, how do people get to work? How do people get their food shopping? It’s about co-locating the estate,” he adds.

“On a really basic level, we either have a society in which transport is needed, or it’s not. Then we ask ourselves, what are the cheapest forms of providing transport, in the total sense? Let’s make our decision on that basis.

“At the moment we distort the market, politically, to favour private transport. If you live in a distorted market for private transport and you say, ‘oh, but can we afford public transport?’ Well, we’re already subsidising private transport, how about we stop doing that, maybe then we’d actually have some money left over.”

ACTIVE TRAVEL – A MAGIC PILL FOR SHORTER JOURNEYS?

A lack of access to safe transport creates an obesogenic environment, i.e. one that tends to weight gain by limiting exercise opportunities and access to nutritious, fresh, affordable food. A solution to many of these problems is improving access to walking and cycling.

Cycling should be a cheap and easy transport solution, but cycling growth is held back in areas that could most benefit it, i.e. areas with poor transport access,

by dangerous roads and pavements, as well as cultural norms and perceptions it is a ‘poor man’s transport’. Traditionally, cycle routes have been constructed to city centres from well-heeled neighbourhoods with already high cycling levels, rather than targeting neighbourhoods with poor transport access.

Professor Rachel Aldred, director of the Active Travel Academy at the University of Westminster, says: “If you focus on building cycle routes to financial centres, that doesn’t serve the journeys people on low incomes might take to their places of work”.

She says those on lower incomes tend to use buses more, which tend to be shorter trips that could switch to walking and cycling – pertinent during Covid-19 restrictions. As those on lower incomes walk more, cycling could shorten some journey times by replacing longer walks.

It has to be attractive, though. Aldred says: “Infrastructure is more important in a sense, if you put in really good infrastructure, it shows cycling isn’t just for people without a choice.”

In West Yorkshire, the 14-mile Leeds-Bradford cycleway was built in 2016 in one of the region’s most deprived areas, to help those on low incomes cycle and cut congestion. West Yorkshire Combined Authority targeted further assistance at the most disadvantaged communities including cycle training for job seekers, and ‘cycling on prescription’, teaching cycling and



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Andrew Percy, Institute for Global Prosperity at UCL

some of London’s poorest areas, but also to “a steadily increasing share of trips by residents of highly-deprived areas” in the original cycle hire zone.

There was some drop-off of those users after prices increased in 2013, however.

Sustrans Scotland’s Seumas Skinner has worked on a number of infrastructure programmes targeting deprived communities, ranging in size.

One small scheme involved the construction of a simple ramp onto the Forth & Clyde Canal from a Clydebank Housing Association centre, creating a safe cycle route in one of the most deprived areas of Scotland. Alongside this, refurbished bikes were made available to residents alongside cycle maintenance training.

Skinner says: “People in deprived areas have a lack of access to transport, and very often have associated health and wellbeing difficulties. By working with projects across areas of social deprivation, we’re helping to get people more active, helping to encourage people to exercise for health benefits and to make it easier for them to actually do things like get back into the job market or get back into employment, and, of course, visit friends and family.

“Currently, this is even more important, with the need for social distancing, which a lot of our measures allow for.”

He notes a pent-up demand for cycling in low income communities, once the infrastructure is there and says: “The amount of support and interest we’ve seen from organisations across Scotland suggests a vast number of people are interested in the opportunities for cycling, it’s more the accessibility to safe infrastructure that’s the real problem.” [ST](#)

TURN OVER FOR THE PEER REVIEWS