



CRC 15/09

12 June 2009

How flexible taxi services can help connect rural communities

The Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) and Commission for Integrated Transport (CfIT) today visited the Rural Wheels initiative in Cumbria, a shared taxi scheme that provides subsidised travel for rural communities. The visit marks the start of a campaign in support of CfIT's recent report calling for Government to announce and fund a large-scale shared taxi project, 'TaxiPlus'.

Rural bus provision has declined steadily over the past decades as bus operators focus on more lucrative urban markets. Rural isolation has been compounded by a move away from local service provision – the closure of post offices, shops and garages in particular – resulting in poor access to many facilities for the 19% of the English population (9.5 million people) who live in rural areas. These communities have little choice but to own a car when bus services are infrequent, stop early in the day, and don't run at all at weekends. But in a recession, with petrol prices rising again and redundancies hitting families hard, it is simply not possible for many to maintain their own private car leading to significant pockets of social exclusion.

CfIT and the CRC strongly believe that there is a practical, affordable answer to this growing rural problem, hence the visit today. Rural Wheels in Cumbria is one of the UK's best examples of a shared taxi scheme that is integrated into the wider transport network. Operated by Cumbria County Council, it provides door-to-door transport when people want it and at reasonable cost, using smart card technology for ease of payment. The scheme covers the entire county and last year carried over 12,000 people, charging 30p per mile. It is run and managed by the Council's passenger transport team.

Dr. Lynn Sloman, Vice-Chair of CfIT says: "This is a truly innovative solution to a really intractable problem in rural areas. Rural Wheels offers a practical, affordable way for people to be connected to train and bus services; this is about simple, everyday needs, taking your children to school or getting to and from work. However, our research has found that the framework for operating shared-taxi schemes is complicated. We need reform of the licensing of taxis and the funding for public transport in order to stimulate these services. This is why we are now pushing for Government to fund a seven-year large-scale pilot project to demonstrate the value of these 'TaxiPlus' shared taxi schemes. We've arranged this visit for policy makers to see at first hand the opportunity shared taxis can provide for rural people."

Dr. Stuart Burgess, chair of the CRC and the Government's Rural Advocate, adds: "Rural bus provision has declined steadily over the past twenty years. This, combined with a reduction in local services, such as post offices and shops, has resulted in poorer access to many facilities for the 9.5 million people living in rural England.

"CRC's research has shown that just half of rural households are located within 13 minutes of an hourly or better bus service, compared with almost 90% in urban areas. Even if buses are running, services are generally patchy, operate just two or three times a week, and can be inconvenient and expensive.

"Many people are forced to buy a car or second car just to carry out basic daily tasks such as going to work, taking children to school or accessing medical facilities – often stretching themselves financially to do so. Low income households in the least densely populated areas spend over 30% more on motoring per week than those in more densely populated areas.

“Today’s visit will help us understand how community schemes like shared taxis can deliver cheaper, subsidised transport even in areas where there is currently none at all, allowing people better access to jobs and services, as well as reducing car dependence and cutting emissions. More efficient and environmentally beneficial ways for rural people to move around in rural areas now need to be found. Rural Wheels appears to be an ideal solution.”

Dr. Sloman concludes: “The UK should aim for shared taxi schemes to be developed in the UK to the same scale as in mainland Europe. Schemes there provide from five to fifty times as many passenger trips as typical schemes in England, and have achieved significant economies of scale. Shared taxi services only run when requested and so are more cost-effective and environmentally sustainable than conventional rural bus services. But most importantly they offer flexible, affordable services which complement the wider public transport network. We are pressing for Government to fund a pilot to demonstrate the very real benefits offered”.

Residents have also praised the scheme. One young mother said; “Without Rural Wheels my son wouldn’t be able to attend his after school club; I simply couldn’t get him home if he missed the school bus. It means he can stay with his friends doing something he enjoys, and comes home safely too.”

ENDS

For further information contact Chris Wynne-Davies from the CRC on 01242 534070 and Lara Thornton from CfIT on 07855 848 082, or John Ballard from Cumbria CC on 01228 226 334

Notes to editors:

1 Further details of the Rural Wheels scheme can be found on the Cumbria County Council website at: www.cumbria.gov.uk/roads-transport/commtrans/ruralwheels.asp

2 The Commission for Integrated Transport (CfIT) is an independent body advising the Government on integrated transport policy. Further information about CfIT can be found at: www.cfit.gov.uk

3 The CRC was established in April 2005 and became an independent body on 1 October 2006 following the enactment of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. The role of the CRC is to provide well-informed, independent advice to government and ensure that policies reflect the real needs and circumstances of people living and working in rural England. We give particular focus to tackling disadvantage and economic underperformance.

We have three key functions:

- Advocate: the voice for rural people, business and communities;
- Expert adviser: providing evidence-based, objective advice to government and others; and
- Independent watchdog: monitoring and reporting on the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally.

Further information about the CRC and its work can be found at: www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk