Summary of the 2021vSRP session on Rural Mobility
Hosted by the Scottish Rural and Islands Transport Community (SRITC)
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How COVID can be an accelerator for rural mobility: SRITC at the Scottish Rural Parliament

Introduction:

Covid-19 brought transportation to a standstill throughout 2020. We've repeatedly heard about people moving to online meetings and not traveling anywhere near as much as they did for work in the past. This anecdote was even mentioned by our guest speaker Kate Redpath from the Marr Area Partnership who confirmed that their travel spend for the year had been zero.

Despite the dark cloud that has marked transportation over the last year, there are signs that Covid-19 has sparked a retrospective look for many at a personal and governmental level. We've seen an acceleration in migrational and work trends that were otherwise expected to take place over the next 10 to 15 years. In particular, we have seen movement away from cities and people working remotely due to the convenience of technology. This acceleration is spurring new collaborations and a shift in thinking about how rural communities operate.

As part of the series of online events for the Scottish Rural Parliament 2021, Scottish Rural and Island Transport Community was asked to host the session on rural mobility. The theme continued from the 2020 SRITC Convention which asked the question, "How COVID can be an accelerator for rural mobility". Those findings were published in a [report](#) and, given the Scottish Rural Parliament session took place five months later, it was appropriate to revisit this theme and see if anything had changed.

Session Presentations

To open the session, **Rachael Murphy** from the [Community Transport Association](#) (CTA) interviewed **Kate Redpath** from the [Marr Area Partnership](#) (MAP). CTA is the membership body for Community Transport across the UK. With 150 members across Scotland, CTA is a strong advocate for rural Community Transport Operators and the key role that they play in rural mobility. Rachael is Director for Scotland and has been part of the team since 2017. MAP supports communities in the Marr area to develop and grow into thriving, successful communities with secure economic, environmental and social futures. Kate is a Development Officer who joined MAP in August 2019. The Marrs area covers 47% of Aberdeenshire but consists of 13 people per square kilometer which demonstrates the rurality of the region.

Kate outlined the variety of work undertaken by MAP. She is currently working on a plan to promote COP26 in the Marrs area while also dealing with emails about soggy walkways!

Connected communities and transport is an ongoing focus for MAP. Over the last couple years, MAP has hosted a number of workshops that explored transportation. These

workshops highlighted the 'last mile' transport and delivery issues faced by the residents in the area (or as she fondly referred to it, "the last 10 miles" issues).

When asked about how to ensure that communities are heard, Kate recommended attending local events and gathering locations like markets and schools when soliciting opinions. She outlined how this would ensure that everybody is heard rather than just the loudest voices.

Kate also explored the difficulties raised by Covid and the need for the further funding of anchor organisations to ensure that the voices of communities are heard. In particular she highlighted the fact that local knowledge has a lot of the answers to the questions asked by central government and that anchor organisations amplify these voices to reach the next level of decision makers.

Following the above, we heard from **Professor Laurie Pickup**, International Director of Vectos/SLR and Chair of the International Transport Forum working group for innovation in rural and peripheral areas.

Laurie highlighted the fact that change, both behavioral and legislative, appeared to be on the horizon. However, he cautioned against the slow pace and form that this change took.

To set the scene, Laurie explored the definition of "rural". In the EU, 27% of the population live rurally but as Laurie pointed out, in some areas a village with 300 people is considered "urban". When this is taken into account, then the population living rurally rises to 33% of the total EU population. Laurie also highlighted the importance of language in these conversations and the urban-centric nature of words like "peripheral" and "remote".

Laurie further divided the segments of the rural population by their various needs. He identified (1) Locals; (2) Incomers; (3) Home comers; and (4) Visitors. The transportation needs of each group are different with different travel patterns and purposes. Laurie called for a sensitive and nuanced approach to rural transportation. This nuanced approach could be delivered through a 'shopping bag' of different options including asset-sharing such as car and e-bike sharing, flexible transport services such as flexible route and door-to-door Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) and ride-sharing like care pooling, shared taxis, e-hitchhiking and volunteer lift giving. All these options require significant investment to take to the next level. Laurie acknowledged the increased interest in Mobility as a Service (MaaS) and the establishment of mobility hubs as centres for work, parcels collections, socialising etc. He also expressed amusement about mobility hubs effectively recreating the village centre/green.

Laurie also highlighted the importance of looking at mobility through the lens of rural life, not as an offshoot of urban transportation planning. Laurie revealed that out of all the EU

member states only 4 had rural development plans despite the fact that rural communities are responsible for feeding urban centres.

After the presentation and interview, the conversation addressed the Questions presented by those attending and was concluded with remarks from Laurie Pickup on the future

Discussion themes

As outlined earlier the workshops focused on one question, How COVID can be an accelerator for rural mobility? Diving the groups with a balance between private, public, community stakeholders was key to ensuring a robust and dynamic conversation. This design thinking and co-creation approach also underpinned the workshops at the SRITC Convention in 2020. Four key themes, collaboration, working patterns, connection and interaction emerged across the groups and are summarised below:

Accelerators

1.   Collaboration opportunities and integration: All groups identified collaboration as a key result of the pandemic. After a year of working closer to home and working as a community to cope with the challenges of the pandemic, many participants mentioned a change of attitude. Geographic limitations on travel have fostered collaborations in communities as communities have been forced to solve issues together that were previously dealt with by a wider network. The benefit of this is that it highlights collaborations key to integrated and logical mobility. The group acknowledged that these new relationships will be key as we exit the pandemic.

This collaborative spirit was particularly mentioned in relation to Community Transport, which has stepped in to meet local needs. The agility of local efforts in confronting the pandemic has formed a case study for further investment in the future.

2.   Where we work: As many living in rural communities are able to stay at home, rather than frequent or even daily travel to urban areas, there may be an opportunity to more strongly invest in local and rural mobility. Different participants have their own ideas of what this might look like. Some were very interested in the *20 minute neighborhood* model or the *mobility hub* model, focusing on shared community spaces to work from, along with centers of shared transport modes. Maintaining local assets, will further allow residents to invest in their community, rather than spending on renting offices in urban centers or high long-distance transport costs and in turn bring decarbonisation to rural areas.

Moving the focus from major artillery routes onto local roads has the potential to impact how funding is allocated and where mobility provision like public or community transport fit in the mobility matrix.

3.   How we connect: Over the last year, we have witnessed an increase in Scottish Government commitment to broadband and wider digital rollout including funding SCVO's Digital Participation Project which was welcomed however In the rural conversation, we often hear that a lack of reliable connection renders app-based services virtually unusable. This impacts on every form of mobility: from casual lift-share apps to complex Mobility as a Service solutions. Furthermore it also impacts on the emerging virtual neighbourhood that was discussed in the 20 minute neighbourhood meeting at SRP. If rural communities can harness the power of digital, many participants believed there is a real catalyst for the rural mobility landscape.

4.   A need for human interaction: After a year of Zoom/Teams calls, social distancing and fear, participants spoke about a profound desire to re-establish human interaction. This can be a catalyst for increased use of shared modes like public and community transport as well as active transport where you are able to be out with people collaboratively.

Constraints

Whilst the sessions were positive about how rural communities could harness COVID-19 as a catalyst, there were nonetheless concerns which are detailed below.

1.   Funding: Impending recession weighed heavy on some participants' minds, especially with regard to local authority investment in mobility. Community Transport, which is particularly vulnerable to funding cuts, should be regarded as a core pillar of rural mobility and resourced as such. Currently it is treated as a 'desirable extra', partly due to difficulties in quantifying its impact, with transport authorities and local authorities eager to encourage but not fund it. Community Transport tends to occupy a space out-with the local strategic transport planning system, mopping up system gaps and failures.

2.   Accessibility: Equality groups' negative experience of transport is aggravated by rurality, especially remote rurality. Too often the focus of rural transport strategy is on contractor costs and the impact of removing services rather than what could be done to make existing services more available and accessible. Community consultation processes are not designed to be accessible, taking place in locations that are not well serviced by public transport or online where many struggle to get a good connection. Equality Impact Assessments are inconsistently applied, reflecting a lack of data on equality groups' experiences of rural transport and lack of understanding amongst Transport Scotland and

local authorities of real-life impact on the ground. It is not unusual for lived experience experts such as Access Panels to be consulted once planning decisions are made rather than during the planning process. As a result, local transport initiatives frequently do not meet the Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland (MACS) Triple A Check – Available, Accessible and Affordable.

3.   <u>Vehicle ownership patterns:</u> Whilst public transport is scant in rural areas, the government advice against using it in the early days of the pandemic risks a long-term return to the private car. Longer term, reducing the need to travel through the roll-out of initiatives such as NHS Scotland's Near Me service is core to successful local transport strategies.

4.   <u>A clear vision:</u> Our best intentions to *build back better* are up against fatigue from a year of pandemic and what "better" means in the context of rural and island mobility.

Recommended actions

1.   The creation of a Rural & Island Mobility inter-departmental government working group that ensures a joined-up policy approach cross transport (all modes), economic development, environmental/sustainability, spatial planning, and digital.

2.   Access to open transport data including real time passenger information is a key enabler to develop demand responsive, multi-modal services that will catalyse social and economic growth across Scotland's rural communities. A clear set of expectations and roadmaps to be established within the next 12 months by Transport Scotland working collaboratively with all transportation and mobility providers including but not limited to car sharing, ferries, planes, bus etc.

3.   Market-driven inequality focuses investment on services and innovation pilots to urban areas and fails to provide an equilibrium for national economic development. Significant additional investment in rural and islands areas is required to enable a 'leveling up' of transport across Scotland. Additional investment should include a Rural and Island Transport & Mobility Innovation Fund for smaller-scale, community led projects.

4.   The current pilot ethos of operating for 6-12months is insufficient to provide sustainable insight into behavior change and the ability to meet policy objectives. To

this end, the request is to commit to lengthening walking and cycling pilots to a minimum of 3years and all other modes to a minimum of 18months.

5.   The third sector provides certain communities with lifeline services that are not available elsewhere. These services span a variety of modes. To further foster these organisations, a tailored-to-the-third-sector framework should be developed that guides the commissioning of services based on communities identifying gaps not addressed by transport services.

6.   Political commitment and action to address the increasing economic and social damage caused by the frequent levels of disruption to, and poor connectivity between, the lifeline travel services that the residents and businesses located on Scotland's island communities depend on. We recommend the commissioning of an urgent review of Island services over the next 12 months to identify and prioritise transportation gaps.

7.   The support and creation of a sustainable transport STEM challenge to give young people across Scotland the opportunity to think about solutions to a huge range of topics such as rural mobility, active travel, last mile deliveries, rail, cars, buses, freight, logistics, decarbonisation, social isolation, behaviour change, transport modelling, demand responsive transport, car sharing, EVs, HVs, fuels, cycling, e-bikes, e-cargo, unmanned transport drones to name but a few.

8.   A review of transportation legislation in general and transport companies' compliance to the Equality Act 2010 specifically, to help facilitate flexible and fully accessible services to rural and island communities.

9.   SRITC is an established member-led community and has recently become a Community Interest Company. The organisation has contributed to the National Transport Strategy review and supported many individuals, SMEs and organisations to engage on transport and mobility related issues. This work has been possible due to the extensive passion and enthusiasm of a few volunteers. In order to continue leading the field both in Scotland, UK and overseas, it is recommended that the Scottish Government supports SRITC to expand its network. This will enable SRITC to further build collaborations between rural community organisations, small businesses, transport operators and entrepreneurs across Scotland and share knowledge on ongoing challenges and innovation in rural and island transportation.

Conclusion

The session was dynamic, inspiring and brought together an array of different stakeholders involved in rural mobility in Scotland. The four themes which emerged touch upon and built on those explored at the SRITC Convention in 2020 which were, connectivity, transport change, enabling innovation and the 3Ps (People, Processes and Procurement). Inevitably the uncertainty around the future, particularly that of funding, focused minds but so did the opportunities and in usual rural fashion, the ability to look at the multi-faceted entity that is 'rural', positives were highlighted with the most notable being the role of collaboration.