

Written evidence submitted by the Community Rail Network (BCC0075)

Community Rail Network is a not-for-profit organisation working across Britain to support, champion and represent community rail: a growing, thriving grassroots movement that works to engage communities with their railways, and ensure local people benefit from railways and stations.

This growing movement now includes 75 community rail partnerships (CRPs), c. 1,300 'station friends' volunteer groups, and other community groups linked to the railways, spread across Britain. These are community-based and community-led groups and organisations, working closely with the rail industry, to:

- Enhance the railways' contribution to local sustainable development and community wellbeing, including by maximising access to and use of the railways;
- Ensure the community has a voice and plays a part in the development and improvement of our railways, so this meets community needs and aspirations and delivers maximum benefit;
- Communicate the development and importance of our railways to communities, enhancing understanding and pride, and promoting rail as a key part of sustainable, healthy travel.

Find out more about our work, and our members, at www.communityrail.org.uk

A key part of community rail's work is spearheading modal integration with rail to better meet local people's needs, encouraging and enabling links with other forms of public transport, e.g. buses, active travel, and community and shared mobility. As such, we are submitting a short response to point c. of the call for evidence in the 'Buses connecting communities' inquiry, as set out below.

How effectively bus services function as part of integrated multi-modal networks that improve mobility for people who live in areas with declining services.

In community rail, our experience suggests a currently fragmented transport system, in that transport modes are planned and operated in siloes, with modal integration greatly lacking in communities of all types and sizes, just

about everywhere outside (some) big city centres. This contributes to socio-economic exclusion, which can be heightened in rural areas, preventing communities from getting value from transport assets and services, and forms a major barrier to low carbon journeys.

We also find that bus and rail operators generally don't work together, and can treat the other as competition, meaning a lack of timetabling alignment and viable, accessible interchange. This issue is frequently put in the 'too difficult' box and so deprioritised, and it tends to be hard for communities to influence (despite often being acutely aware of specific local shortcomings), suggesting a need for systemic change. This is particularly the case in rural areas, where buses are a vital, and sometimes the only, link in being able to access local rail networks and stations.

In our experience, effective community engagement is vital for understanding the myriad of issues and barriers in advancing sustainable, inclusive transport and mobility, and unlocking place-based solutions that local people buy into and want to use. The role of the community and voluntary sector (third sector) is critical here, in ensuring that communities are empowered to play a leading and meaningful role in developing alternatives to private car dependency and creating greener transport opportunities and habits.

In community rail, we have various examples of community rail partnerships and groups working with local bus operators to spearhead station/infrastructure/wayfinding improvements (such as the integrated travel map at Seaford Station ¹) timetable alignments (such as those to facilitate combined rail and bus travel to Aldeburgh in East Suffolk ²), combined multi-modal ticketing (as seen in the 'Waterside Wanderer' rail/bus/ferry ticket ³), and new rail-bus links to promote public transport over private car use (such as the Walkden Station to RHS Bridgewater service ⁴). The benefits of such projects are vast, allowing people to use the railway to access the opportunities they want and to make greener journeys.

To facilitate the step-change needed, we recommend forging a new, whole-systems approach across the transport field, based on high-level engagement and collaboration across the bus and rail sectors, leaders in active travel, shared and community transport, and different levels of government. This needs to ensure, via legislative changes, if necessary, a strong, overt focus on achieving coherent, joined-up development of sustainable and inclusive modes

to rapidly accelerate decarbonisation, create fair access to opportunity, and empower communities.

We recommend that policy, such as the new Integrated National Transport Strategy, should set out an approach to ensure transport operators and authorities improve integration between sustainable modes and services, and work in synergy to provide a coherent, viable, attractive alternative to the private car. Across rail and the wider transport sector, delivery plans and decision-making should reflect the sustainable transport hierarchy, being clear about the need to reduce car dependency and provide for non-drivers, and the benefits this brings, across the urban to rural spectrum.

We also recommend adopting an approach at all levels of transport governance and operations that puts communities in the lead of change, using engaging, empowering methods that draw on local knowledge and insights to improve modal integration, inclusion and accessibility, and sustainable and healthy mobility, supporting structural and behavioural change simultaneously. This includes ensuring that transport operators, planners and developers are engaging effectively with local communities (including via the many community rail, transport user, and active travel groups), and removing the barriers to community-led initiatives such as those to improve rail-bus links.

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Endnotes

¹ See page 15 in <https://communityrail.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/VoCR-report-24-FINAL-FOR-WEB.pdf>

² See page 24 in <https://communityrail.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Connected-stations-a-guide-to-community-led-station-travel-planning.pdf>

³ See page 13 in <https://communityrail.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Connected-stations-a-guide-to-community-led-station-travel-planning.pdf>

⁴ See page 14 in <https://communityrail.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Connected-stations-a-guide-to-community-led-station-travel-planning.pdf>