



Left
Behind
Neighbourhoods

Session 5 briefing: buses, broadband and Beeching boosting connectivity in 'left behind' neighbourhoods

January 2021

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This briefing provides an overview of the connectivity issues facing England's 225 'left behind' neighbourhoods. Drawing on the latest OCSI data dive, and new APPG research commissioned from the Campaign for Better Transport, it explores how 'left behind' neighbourhoods are often more isolated from public services including hospitals and job opportunities, and face challenges related to digital connectivity and online access. It considers how the COVID-19 pandemic, which has highlighted these issues, might provide an impetus to address them, in part by strengthening the influence of local communities.

At a glance

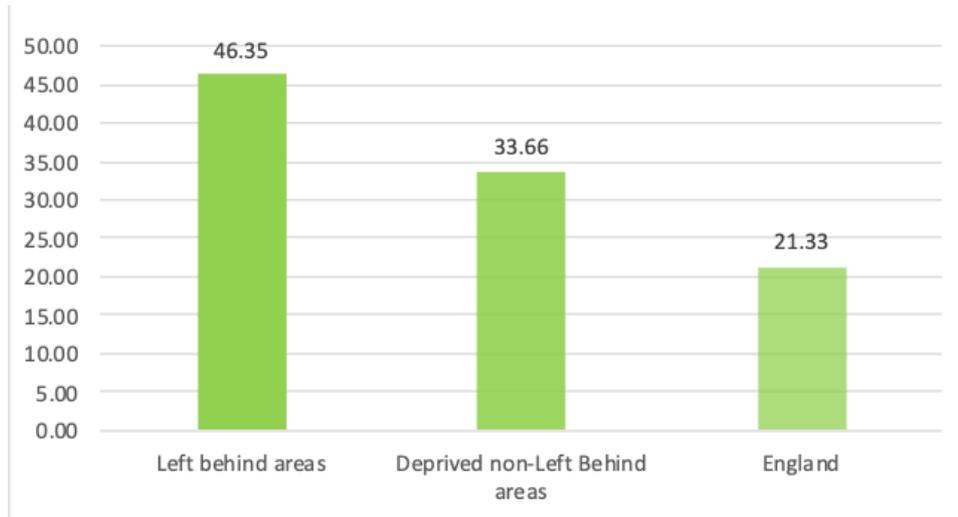
Poor levels of connectivity, both physical and digital, are one of the key characteristics, and an underlying determinant of, a 'left behind' area. The well-documented chronic disadvantage faced by many residents in 'left behind' neighbourhoods in terms of health, jobs, and education (Local Trust 2019) are compounded by poor connectivity. This can also often make it harder for local people to take sustained action and make positive improvements to their personal circumstances and their community's prospects.

The latest data dive (OCSI 2020) and new research commissioned for the APPG shows:

- **longer travel times:** the residents of 'left behind' areas have longer journeys to key health, employment and education services than equally deprived neighbourhoods, particularly hospitals (almost 80 areas are over 10km from the nearest A&E);
- **low levels of car ownership:** a significant minority of households have no access to a car (40%); which is much higher than across England as a whole (26%);
- **a greater reliance on public transport** than other areas: local authorities with 'left behind' wards have on average a higher number of bus journeys per head than local authorities without;
- **...but a decline in bus services:** in the majority of local authorities with 'left behind' neighbourhoods that perform poorly for connectivity, both commercial and supported local bus services have declined in recent years;
- **limited rail services:** only a quarter of 'left behind' neighbourhoods benefit from a rail station, with 88 stations in 'left behind' neighbourhoods, compared to 175 pre-Beeching;
- **digital divide:** residents have poorer internet access than other similarly deprived neighbourhoods and lower speeds, with a much higher proportion (almost 80 per cent) not using the internet as part of their everyday lives.

Public transport in 'left behind' neighbourhoods has deteriorated over time, meaning poorer access to employment, education, public services and other opportunities for people without private vehicles, whilst poor digital connectivity and engagement risks disconnection from a wider world that is increasingly online.

Community Needs Index: Disconnectedness score



Connectivity and the Community Needs Index (CNI)

The CNI measures social infrastructure, and one of the domains is connectivity. By connectivity we mean physical (ie transport) and digital (online) connectivity. The connectivity score measures whether residents have access to key services within reasonable travelling distance in order to capture the impact of the broad connectivity challenges faced by people living in ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods. It also considers how good local public transport and digital infrastructure is, and the strength of the local jobs market. The higher the connectedness score, the greater the connectivity issues faced by local communities and the greater the disconnectedness. As can be seen, ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods experience markedly worse connectivity than other similarly deprived neighbourhoods and England as a whole.

Connectivity challenges

Connectivity has been at the centre of British politics for the last few years, from contentious debates over big infrastructure projects such as High Speed Two and how to improve transport across the Northern Powerhouse, to proposals for great integration of local transport services under bus franchising arrangements and how best to upgrade digital networks through the roll-out of 5G technology. The government has set out a number of proposals designed to enhance connectivity across the UK, whilst combined and local authorities have played a bigger role in local transport provision amidst moves to more integrated transport modes and nodes.

The role of communities in improving the connectivity of people and places is increasingly recognised as important. Bringing transport services closer to users has been beneficial: as the

Urban Transport Group (2017) found in “all cases, devolution has delivered significant benefits for passengers and communities.” In recent years, communities have begun doing more for themselves, from working with local authorities and their elected representatives to develop local transport action plans, to identifying rail services and stations for restoration under the £500 million Restoring Your Railway Fund.

Those communities with the necessary capacity, confidence and capital to respond to their connectivity challenges can identify and implement solutions to meet local needs. From directly providing community-owned broadband schemes in ‘not-spots’ and affordable and flexible high-quality enterprise level 4G to households that brings down the cost of data consumption, to commissioning and operating local community bus services that are run as social enterprises to provide public transport in transport deserts (Campaign for Better Transport 2020b), putting communities in greater control of local transport infrastructure can pay dividends.

Buses

Bus provision was de-regulated in the 1980s, with the objective of improving services and reducing fares. However, although bus travel still provides around 12 million journeys per day (Transport Select Committee 2019), even before the pandemic hit, bus use was in decline. Across England, passenger journeys on local bus services have gone down by 18 per cent per head over the last ten years. The majority of bus routes are now operated by private companies, with local authorities able to protect a route where the service is deemed of social value. Since January 2014, around £43m has been given in grants to local authorities to help maintain socially necessary bus services that would otherwise not be financially viable. Despite this, the Transport Select Committee (2019) found that many bus routes “are being withdrawn, or their frequency reduced, and the communities they serve are becoming isolated.”

Commercial bus provision has declined by six per cent, whilst local authority supported provision has declined by a third. New research for the APPG shows that local authorities with ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods have been hardest hit, with total provision declining by 14.4 per cent, compared to 0.2 per cent in local authorities without a ‘left behind’ neighbourhood. This is despite local authorities with ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods having higher average bus journeys per head (42.5) than local authorities without a ‘left behind’ neighbourhood.

In response to the Transport Select Committee’s recommendations, the government has committed to developing a £220m national bus strategy and new funding settlement designed to ensure that bus transportation is sustainable (Department of Transport 2019). Whilst the full strategy is due to be published early this year, it has already been noted that it will include £20m to the West Midlands to improve bus provision, as well as setting up a number of Superbus networks, to be trialled first in Cornwall. Alongside the strategy, the Department of Transport will develop a new open data portal which will contain information on bus services to support digital timetabling and virtual ticketing systems, helping to increase the efficiency and accuracy of the bus networks (Department of Transport 2020).

In addition, the 2020 National Infrastructure Strategy promised £5bn over the course of this parliament to transform bus services and cycling infrastructure. In the Spending Review, the Chancellor stated that £300m would be made available in 2021-22 to drive transformation of bus services. This funding will be drawn down in the first instance for any further Covid-19 support that may be required (the government committed £30 million to local authorities between 2020/21 to help maintain these services throughout the pandemic). In addition, in 2021-22, £120 million will support delivery of over 800 new zero emission buses, in combination with the Department for Transport's existing commitment to complete the first All Electric Bus Town this financial year.

Broadband

The digital divide has become one of the major policy challenges of the pandemic. It has impacted people's ability to socialise and hindered the ability of many young people to learn effectively throughout lockdown, due to a lack of devices as well as data. Ofcom has noted that 9 per cent of children in the UK don't have access to a laptop, desktop or tablet at home and more than 880,000 young people are living, and now learning, in a household without a mobile internet connection either (Wakefield 2021). In addition, 4.7 million households reported at least one financial problem with their telecommunications bills in the last month of 2020 (Ofcom 2020), whilst social and schooling demands for digital access are likely to rise during the third lockdown.

For 'left behind' neighbourhoods, the digital divide is an everyday reality. New research for the APPG (OCSI 2020) shows that this is more nuanced than simply a lack of access to the internet. Residents do indeed have poorer access and slower speeds than other similarly deprived neighbourhoods (49.1mb/s compared to 51.1mb/s) but 80% do not use the internet in their everyday lives, with a higher proportion of people classified as 'e-withdrawn' and they are using less data than other areas pre-COVID. This suggests that to overcome digital exclusion we need to improve access and build skills, to enable residents to take advantage of online opportunities and navigate the move to digital by default.

In response, the government has been working with Ofcom (2020) and various broadband and mobile data providers on a range of short-term solutions. These include removing data caps on WIFI network downloads, increasing mobile data allowances for educational websites, and reducing tariffs for families on low incomes, as well as distributing over 560,000 laptops to schools and councils in 2020, with another 440,000 purchased for delivery this year. In the long-term, £5bn has been committed to support UK-wide gigabit broadband roll-out, a Shared Rural Network which will extend 4G mobile coverage to 95% of the UK, and £250 million to ensure resilient and secure 5G networks. The Prime Minister has also committed to the expansion of the digital boot camps run in Manchester and Birmingham so that "you can learn IT, whatever your age" (Johnson, 2020).

Beeching

The 'Beeching' cuts of the 1960s saw the British Railway Board, led by Dr Richard Beeching and informed by the 1963 report, *The Reshaping of British Railways*, close almost 2,5000 stations and up to one third of Britain's railway lines. Given much comment about the misguidedness of the Beeching reforms, and which lines ought to re-open (McKie, 2013), in 2019 the government set up the Williams Rail Review to look at the structure of the rail network and the delivery of passenger services. In addition, the 2020 National Infrastructure Strategy sets out plans for High-Speed Rail as well as the Integrated Rail Plan which aims to deliver "transformational improvement in the Midlands and the North". More announcements are expected in 2021.

New research for the APPG by the Campaign for Better Transport has found that more than a quarter of 'left behind' neighbourhoods lost rail stations under the Beeching cuts, with twice as many stations in 'left behind' neighbourhoods pre-Beeching (175) than exist today (88). For many communities this has had a profound effect on their physical connectivity: for example, Blackhalls in County Durham and Town and Pier in Dover, which rank among the worst connected 'left behind' neighbourhoods, lost seven and five local stations respectively. For many areas the restoration of a lost line represents the promise of a return to a more connected community and greater economic opportunities, but with almost three quarters of 'left behind' neighbourhoods not served by a railway station connection or even reconnection remains a distant possibility.

The response to COVID-19: an opportunity to take stock and reset?

COVID-19 has highlighted weaknesses in how as a society we plan, finance and operate public transport and provide digital connectivity. Whilst the pandemic could provide an opportunity to reconnect our communities both physically and digitally, there is also the risk that it could lead in some areas to the public transport offer in particular declining even further. From March 2020 with all non-essential workers forced to stay at home, the demand for public transport virtually ended overnight, whilst conversely the need for digital connectivity sky rocketed. Tube and rail use dropped to less than 5% their usual levels whilst bus use dropped to between 10-15%. The relaxation of measures in the summer saw a limited increase in usage, with demand for public transport in the UK peaking at 30% compared to January 2020. This compares to a rebound to over 50% in Belgium, Denmark, France, Sweden and Germany (Campaign for Better Transport, 2020).

It is estimated homeworking will comprise 27% of all office hours after the pandemic (McKinsey and Co, 2020), this will accelerate digital adoption and significantly reduce demand for public transport. On this basis further changes to the transport landscape might soon be coming down the line. It is important that the needs of 'left behind' neighbourhoods and the role of communities are not overlooked in the post-COVID 're-boot' and that any future overhaul of the system makes sure it works for everyone, particularly those residents who are at risk of being even further 'left behind' and disconnected.

Connectivity improvements hinge upon two factors:

- improving public transport so that people can access services, jobs, amenities and opportunities
- getting residents online.

Residents in 'left behind' neighbourhoods are more reliant on public transport, particularly buses, than residents in other areas, and are also more likely to need frequent access. They are also likely to be increasingly cut off from opportunities and services if their digital access is not improved.

Putting communities in the driving seat

Solutions can often be found in the community. For example, in overcoming the digital divide, locally-rooted groups are often best placed to support the acquisition of information and communication technology (ICT) skills and equipment, providing training (and the opportunities for teaching experience to those with the requisite skills) to help get local residents online. As the APPG has heard in previous evidence sessions, organisations based in the community command the trust of residents supporting the teaching of new skills.

Local solutions to connectivity challenges enable a more tailored approach to meeting needs and better co-ordination between different types of provision. Local authorities therefore need the power to plan, fund and commission transport locally, benefitting from new delivery and funding models and the ability to access alternative sources of revenue to reduce their reliance on central government funding. For example, a move to a single, ring-fenced multi-year funding framework for local bus services would give local areas greater certainty over funding decisions and local bus provision.

In order to have the maximum impact over the long-term, it is important that projects and services should be devised through genuine consultation and in collaboration with the communities that use them. From action on local bus services, to improvements to rail connectivity, funding should be accompanied by co-production with the local community, and investment in the community's capacity to engage and work collaboratively. It is important that communities in general, and 'left behind' neighbourhoods in particular, are able to draw on support and expertise to help them identify options to improve local connectivity, both physical and digital.

For many communities, particularly 'left behind' neighbourhoods with low levels of social infrastructure, building the required levels of community confidence and capacity to engage in co-production with local government, and advocate for local needs and plan and deliver services to boost connectivity, is paramount. The impact of COVID-19 and the comparatively low levels of mutual aid groups and success in accessing charitable COVID-related grant funding in 'left behind' neighbourhoods (APPG/OCSI 2020) has exposed how a deficit in social infrastructure can disadvantage a local area in terms of facilitating community action. As such, additional support and resources, such as through investment in local social infrastructure, will be an essential component in reconnecting with those who have for too long been cut off and left disconnected.

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About the APPG on 'left behind' neighbourhoods

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for 'left behind' neighbourhoods is a cross party group of MPs and Peers. It is committed to improving social and economic outcomes for residents living in 'left behind' neighbourhoods, through the development and advocacy of hyper-local initiatives and policies. The group will look at ways to support and rebuild these communities following the disproportionate impact of COVID-19, to ensure they are stronger and more resilient in the future.