Voluntary Health Scotland response to the National Transport Strategy October 2019

Introduction

Voluntary Health Scotland (VHS) is the national intermediary and network for health charities and other third sector organisations with an active involvement in health. We work with our members and other partners to address health inequalities and to help people and communities live healthier and fairer lives.

Our response has been informed by our members' work and our 2018 study into the lived experience of loneliness and social isolation, The Zubairi Report. This was primary research that involved speaking to 57 individuals through 5 focus groups and 6 depth interviews. The focus of the research was to hear from under-represented demographics namely BME women, people living in socio-economically deprived areas, people living and working in rural areas and paid and unpaid carers of people receiving palliative care. Major themes to emerge were issues around the affordability, availability and accessibility of public transport across Scotland. Although the research looked primarily at tackling loneliness and isolation the findings, in terms of transport, can be applied to a wider context and as such are relevant to the development of the National Transport Strategy (NTS). The report has been mentioned in the Scottish Government Strategy, A Connected Scotland which calls for a 'review of the NTS with accessibility identified as a key theme'. We would also like to commend to you the response of Community Transport Association and AGIL, The Action Group on Isolation and Loneliness.

Issues

A lack of appropriate and affordable transport was raised as an issue in all the focus groups and interviews we conducted.

A third sector organisation supporting people in rural communities said that, "*Some of our volunteers get public transport to our volunteering group but there have been times when volunteers have struggled to afford the weekly bus fare to come out – this stops people from getting involved*".

Another participant in the research said that "*We hear this all the time: 'I'd like to get out' but because of people's socio-economic conditions they may not have money to use public transport – so they can't get out as much as they like – further isolating them*".

A user of a service in an urban area said that "*You are stuck at home with only the TV to keep you company – because you can't afford or there isn't any suitable transport…this is a big factor in leading to depression and the other things that follow depression*".

Speaking about the high costs of public transport and low incomes a participant said *"your quality of life is completely diminished. You cannot even afford your bus fare to even go to the park – you feel completely isolated – you are stuck in the house".*

Participants noted that rural communities often rely more on public transport services

– "*this* [transport] *is a hot topic in many community council meetings – bus services being cut or routes changed. It is an important factor in people being able to get out and about for groceries or out to meet people and do things*"

"*If you don't drive*" you are reliant on public transport which can be expensive and unreliable. Installation of cycle routes and walkable paths and spaces help provide a solution: "*I know an area where a cycle route has just recently been installed. Before, you had to walk or cycle down a dirt path next to a main road where national speed limits apply. People between those two towns, which are such a short distance from each other, would be completely isolated if they did not have a car or could not afford public transport*".

Participants found the process of applying for a bus pass difficult and many of the participants we spoke to who would be eligible for a free bus pass either did not know about their eligibility or did not know how to apply or where to get more information on how to apply.

Solutions

Connectivity is key, people are living further away from places of work and social activity. All of the research participants agreed that there needs to be an improvement in the transport links within and across cities and these need to be drastically improved in rural areas.

Participants also recognised the role of the transport system (including how people can access jobs, services and amenities) in enabling social inclusion and helping those on low incomes. There is a need to ensure equity of transport as it is key to the accessibility of employment, shops and services the lack of which can cause significant problems for those on low incomes. Cuts to bus services, rising public transport fares and the closure of local services can all exacerbate the situation.

Participants highlighted the cost of not addressing the transport aspect of social isolation was an increased welfare dependency and isolation from wider society and its benefits. *"You can't access your work, or pay for a ticket to go to college then you are stuck on benefits"* some people also added that *"sometimes you can't pay your bus fare to the job centre and then you are sanctioned or you have to walk".* They also highlighted that a lack of suitable transport options can result in the loss of people's independence.

Accessibility by a full range of transport modes should always be a priority; bus and car, foot, bicycle and rail as well as ferry. Accessibility by public transport should be as easy and as attractive as possible for everyone within a city, town or small community. There is a need to calibrate transport provision to meet local needs and circumstances, including frequency, accessibility and costs. Multistage transport journeys should be better integrated with clear and up-to-date timetable information so that people can plan their journeys in advance.

It is also necessary to recognise the contribution of Community Transport and more informal transport arrangements and the role these play in tackling transport inequality and reducing social isolation and loneliness.

Community transport is transport that is provided by members of the community in order to meet the needs of those within their community. It was originally developed to support people who are elderly or disabled. However more recently it has evolved to meet the transport needs of other categories of users who may experience transport disadvantage to the same degree.

The development of the NTS has the potential to offer flexible and low cost travel options. Participants identified a lack of mobility due to high costs and often non-existent or few

appropriate travel options and the implications of this on loneliness and social isolation. The NTS should explore the possibility of empowering Local Authorities to make localised transport decisions and offer their own solutions if commercial transport options are lacking.

Community transport is also a key resource in supporting mobility where public transport is not available. This resource must be protected and supported so that it can continue to deliver mobility as a service to many often marginalised communities.

The strategy should also explore the possibility of smart ticketing that can also be used to pay for alternative modes of transport such as community transport, taxis and informal arrangements in rural settings and areas that are underserved by regular, cost-effective and efficient public transport.

There should also be provision for up-to-date, clear and accessible transport information and more should be done to integrate the links between multistage public transport journeys.

Joined up approach to transport planning

Future policy developments should aim to integrate health, housing, environment, community and spatial planning, and transport in order to address socio-economic inequalities in Scotland.

Spatial and transport planning should be brought together in order to create places that are well connected and offer choice in terms of transport options. This process can help to develop walkable neighbourhoods by creating high connectivity (for example, easy routes between destinations), good pedestrian and cycling facilities (such as good street design, lighting, well-maintained pavements, cycle routes, traffic calming measures), and good accessibility (easily reached destinations and facilities, greenspace and strong transport links).

It is essential that places are planned, located and designed strategically to ensure good connectivity between residential areas and employment, retail, services and amenities, predominantly by public transport and active travel modes.

People's transport choices are influenced by the distance that they have to travel to conduct their daily routines as well as the way in which they perceive their physical environment. Improving the quality of the built environment and improving the connections between places can encourage people to make more sustainable travel choices that impact positively on their health such as walking and cycling. Well connected and attractive public places and streets can encourage people to exercise and make active travel choices.

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