

Identifying barriers to implementation of local transport policy: An analysis of bus policy in Great Britain

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to identify barriers to the implementation of local transport policy by exploring bus policy implementation in Great Britain. The methodology is based on an online survey with 56% of local authorities and follow-up interviews with 10 of those officers, analysed via a ten-point hybrid theory. The greatest challenges faced by local authorities included the availability of financial and staff resources, the existence of a clear policy document and inter-organisational communication. The relationship between setting policy objectives, selecting suitable measures to achieve those objectives, and setting and monitoring targets was identified as key to successful policy implementation.

1. Introduction

Buses are the most frequently used and most accessible mode of public transport in Great Britain. They are essential for delivering economic, social, and health benefits. In particular, bus services enable people to get from place to place and provide important access to work, health, and education. In some instances, bus services are the only available mode of transport for those without automobile access. Bus networks are also estimated to generate substantial economic benefits by providing “access to opportunities, reducing pollution and accidents and improving productivity” (Urban Transport Group, 2016). The impact of bus patronage and bus mileage are the key aspects of providing an effective bus network.

Statistics released by Transport Scotland (2016), the Welsh Government (2016) and the UK DfT (2016) show a steady decline in bus mileage across Great Britain outside of London. In Scotland, vehicle kilometres have fallen by 12% over the past five years, while in Wales, the number of vehicle kilometres travelled by subsidised services has fallen by around a third since 2009-10 (Welsh Government, 2016). In England as a whole, mileage supported by local authorities decreased by 0.6% when compared with the previous year. According to DfT (2016), there was a 10% reduction in local authority supported services in England outside London, while commercial mileage increased by 1.4%. Furthermore, over the last decade in England outside of London, local authority supported mileage has decreased by 55 million miles, and commercial mileage has increased by 13 million miles. This is particularly evident where the percentage of bus mileage on supported

services has decreased from 22% in 2004-05 to 17% in 2014-15.

Similar to bus mileage, there has also been a decline in bus usage, which has a damaging effect on the bus network. Additional statistics released by Transport Scotland (2016), the Welsh Government (2016), and the UK DfT (2016) show a steady decline in bus patronage across Great Britain outside of London. This is particularly noticeable where public transport patronage has more than halved from peak levels in the early 1950s (McConville, 1997). In Scotland, around 414 million passenger journeys were made by bus in 2014-15, a decrease of 2% on 2013-14 and a 15% fall from the latest peak in 2007-08. In Wales, around 101 million passenger journeys were made by bus in 2014-15; however, the number of journeys decreased over the last six years. In England outside of London, around 2.28 billion passenger journeys were made by bus in 2014-15. Again, there has been a gradual decline in passenger numbers in recent years including a decrease of 1.3% on 2013-14. Fig. 1 summarises the overall trends in local bus journeys by country, giving a clear indication that bus usage in London has risen as bus usage in England outside of London and in Scotland, and Wales has declined.

A decrease in bus patronage and bus mileage has a damaging effect on the delivery of bus services across the UK. As well as having a negative impact on economic, social, and health benefits, quality of life suffers due to a lack of physical access to jobs, health, education, and amenities (Banister, 2000). To overcome the problems associated with the decline in bus patronage and bus mileage, local transport policies are needed. In particular, local bus policies are vital to the successful provision of local bus service and infrastructure to support the needs of

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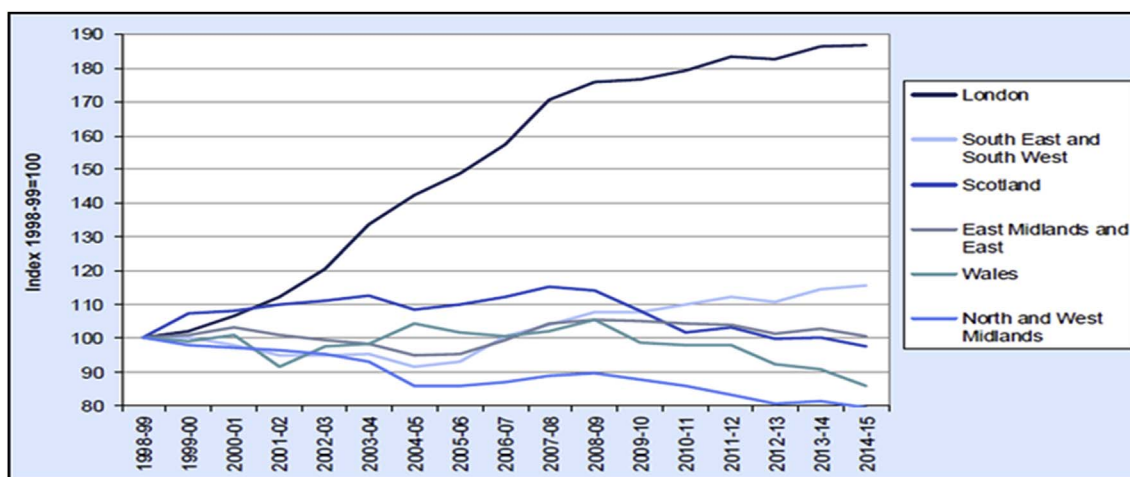


Fig. 1. Local bus journeys by country and groupings of regions 1998-99 to 2014-15.

Source: DfT (2016)

current bus users and to provide an attractive alternative to automobile users. In this research, bus policy means a set of objectives, targets, and related measures, normally developed by the local or regional authority (municipality) that together, if followed and implemented, will bring about improvements in local bus services to support wider transport policy objectives. A bus policy measure is something that is implemented, such as higher quality buses or bus priority lanes on the street. Of course, certain measures, such as new bus shelters, may be relatively easy for a municipality to deliver, since it has direct control over this infrastructure. Measures whose delivery is dependent wholly or in part on other actors, such as bus operators or information providers or the police, can be more difficult to implement.

Under the regulatory framework for local bus services in Great Britain outside London, bus operators are almost all private for-profit companies, and all of them are free to set routes, fares, and timetables as they see fit. This situation is unusual in developed countries; the findings of this research are nonetheless relevant to other regulatory environments. Whenever responsibilities for service planning, strategy, operations, and infrastructure, for example, are split between different organisations (as is the case in most Nordic countries), or even between different parts of the same organisation (the case in major cities in Slovenia, for example), there is scope for strategic policy objectives not to be realised.

Currently, bus policies are included in the Local Transport Plans (LTPs) and Local Transport Strategies (LTSs) of local authorities in England and Scotland, respectively. The first round of these LTPs were submitted by English local authorities in 2001, while LTSs were submitted by Scottish local authorities in 2000. The introduction of the LTS by Scottish local authorities was voluntary compared to LTPs in England which were made a statutory requirement by the 2000 Transport Act (although this requirement was repealed in 2017). The LTPs and LTSs support local authorities to help improve their current bus services (as well as other modes of transport such as walking and cycling, and policy areas such as road safety) and achieve a modal shift from the automobile. According to [Scottish Government \(2005\)](#), local bus networks are more likely to be successful if there is “a close working partnership between the local authority and the bus operators.” These partnerships are vital to overcoming key barriers to successful bus services in terms of “traffic demand management,” “congestion reduction,” “bus priority measures,” “the provision of accessible buses,” “simplified fare structures,” and “route branding.”

Guidance on LTPs associated with the 2000 Act also required English authorities to produce annual monitoring reports to show how their LTPs were progressing. At the end of the first five-year LTP period in 2006, a lengthy Delivery Report was produced to show what had and

had not been implemented, and why, over the previous five years. By contrast, Scottish authorities had no statutory requirement to monitor the progress of their LTS. However, the Local Transport Act 2008 in England removed this system of close monitoring of LTPs. Furthermore, the act also removed the requirement to produce a separate bus strategy. With the abolition of annual monitoring reports and a separate bus strategy, there are currently no statutory requirements in place for local authorities to monitor the performance of local bus services in the UK.

Several studies have highlighted the importance of monitoring LTPs and LTSs. [Speare and Lightowler \(2005\)](#) carried out a study on delivering LTSs in Scotland at the end of the first five-year Scottish LTS period. They summarised lessons learned from the English LTPs which would be useful for preparing and monitoring future LTSs in Scotland. However, they suggested that the absence of a systematic LTS annual reporting process made it more difficult to assess how Scottish authorities have used their LTSs to deliver improvements on the ground, contribute to their objectives or offer value for money for the resources provided. Furthermore, the absence of LTS annual monitoring also meant the problems with LTSs could not be addressed. Another study by [McTigue et al. \(2016\)](#) compared the LTP 2001-2006 and the LTP Delivery Report for three English cities in order to obtain an insight into the importance of reporting in the implementation of local bus policy. A lack of policy resources was identified as a key barrier to implementation, while key aspects of success, such as communication and support within the organisation, were not being documented by local authorities. This, in turn, limited the ability of local authorities to monitor the reasons for successful implementation or lack thereof.

The aim of this research is to identify barriers to implementation of bus policies by local authorities in Great Britain, which can then be generalised both to bus policy in other countries and more broadly to local transport policy.

2. Literature review

2.1. Bus policy in Great Britain

Although no studies specifically address the implementation process for bus policies at the local level, several studies have explored bus deregulation in Great Britain and its impact on the sector. [White \(1995, 1997\)](#) examined the short-term impact of deregulation and found that while the cost per kilometre operated had fallen, patronage had also fallen and profitability only remained marginal. Another study by [White \(2010\)](#) examined the conflict between competition policy and the wider role of the local bus industry in Great Britain since

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