

# Forty shades of rural



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**A** wise man looked me in the eyes early on in this job and said, “I hope you realise, there are actually 40 types of rural?”

The truth that landed with me from that comment was that rural mobility is varied and complex, and we should never forget that when thinking about how people move around in rural areas.

The problem with saying that things are varied and complex is that you can almost hear people filing them in that very real drawer marked ‘too difficult’.

I find the topic of rural consistently generates interest. Hands get wrung at how difficult it all is – or more usually at how difficult it all looks. Then they get thrown up altogether. But people feel there should be something more than there currently is.

Another memory, this time of a property guru explaining that a couple of generations ago people referred to ‘residential’ development as one thing. It was where people lived. Simple. But that now those in property refer to build to rent, or affordable housing, or social housing, or mixed use residential and commercial, and so on. The point is that the definitions have become sharper, the complex landscape more accurately described.

This is the approach we need with rural mobility. What are we talking about? The least dense parts of the country? Those that are right on the edge of major conurbations? Both are ‘rural’, yet clearly movement within both will be significantly different. And then what about the inter-relationship between urban and rural?

Journeys are of course both at different points in time, starting in urban and ending in rural or vice versa. This isn’t about merging all this together, but instead picking it apart more to understand where the opportunities might lie.

Some parts of rural Britain in fact have significant pinch points of demand. Some have heavily concentrated flows. Some offer opportunities to think again how to use fleets. All of this needs pulling apart and then drawing together.

Rural areas of Britain are heavily dependent on the private car, that hardly needs saying. But that doesn’t have to be the case to the same degree in the future. And it surely can’t be right that the dysfunctionalities of cost, pollution, inactivity that private car use – especially solo occupancy private car use – place on people become ever more concentrated in rural areas.

So let’s get into what we mean by rural. Take this as the idiot’s guide – a comment on the author, not the reader – as to where we could start (not finish). This is not a picture of the whole tree, rather a sketch of some of the lower-hanging fruit on it.

I hope that if the new Government continues with the previous administration’s idea of a rural mobility strategy that these are points we can all be revisiting as we seek to get the public and the private sector to focus on what they could achieve with more sustainable rural mobility.

One way of understanding any journey patterns is to look at origin and destination pairs. We know from general evidence around shared mobility that the journey to and from work is a really important one to examine. There are lots of forms of these of course, but one version that I think shows promise is the journey to work at a peri-urban site such as a business park, relocated hospital, science park – the list goes on – from a rural origin. Liftsharing in private cars; on-demand bus services to some of the neighbouring small towns or villages; final mile interventions to make existing public transport a much more viable option; a car club offer, ideally one that takes over the employers’ fleet too; a dedicated bike share scheme; upgraded cycling facilities. That is a non-exhaustive list of the weapons/carrots available, all relatively short-term and simple measures.

Over time we might add pleasant yet direct cycling routes; improved walking routes; building over at least some of the car parks and/or charging for their use. If we should be building out residential areas to make the private car much less like an adjunct to your living room and much more like a grotty smokers’ zone at the bottom of a fire escape, then we should be doing the same with workplaces. All these measures help sort the destina-

tion. These are low hanging fruit, relatively speaking. Employers know origin and destinations and often have prime behaviour change levers within their grasp: land control; incentivisation; messaging; social norms within the workplace.

Imagine if employers were measured on the emissions of staff travel to, from and for work.

County towns have similarities in that the destination point is a hub. One of the differences is that the local highway authority generally has a lot of power and influence to bring to bear, should it choose to use it. Park-and-ride can be added to the mix here, with journeys inbound to the town transferring to a sustainable last ‘mile’; and journeys to that park-and-ride site made as sustainable as possible. Building this as a mobility hub format (Mobility Matters *LTT* 08 Nov), where public and shared transport come together with active travel, is an

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obvious step.

Tourism is another opportunity area, especially those journeys that start from conurbations and have a public transport option for most of the journey length. Tourists are of course also more likely to lack a private car if they are visiting from abroad or another part of the UK. Yet so many of these journeys from conurbations fail because of the difficulty making the last handful of miles, with poor or non-existent public transport connections, roads that are hostile environments, and other deterrents.

But with that train or coach or bus service we are getting people so nearly there, surely we can think how to get them all the way more sustainably? If we can do so it would of course take private cars out of cities – those that are otherwise kept largely for such trips.

Another way into this is to think about the vehicles as well as the journeys. Rural areas offer some interesting opportunities here. The more sparsely populated the area, the more likely it is that utilities and institutions of all kinds have their own vehicles to ‘cover’ these bigger, less

dense areas. Because each entity needs a vehicle – or thinks it does – to cover such an area, this can lead to over-provision. There is also the age-old question of how well these fleet vehicles are used. If you can add on the allowances system that may pertain around these fleets, then experience has shown it can be possible to cut the number of vehicles (and thus cost) substantially. These vehicles can then be potentially used by the community more broadly during out of work times, providing a potential neat fit leisure use if the journey to work has been made more sustainable.

I said this wasn’t going to be exhaustive, and I have left many stones unturned here: community transport; social needs transport; community-scale schemes and the power of engaging with communities; unsustainable (broadly defined) rural bus services, which have borne a brunt of cuts in recent years.

While central government doesn’t hold the ultimate answers to much of this, it could set out a carefully-designed and periodically refreshed framework for sustainable rural mobility. That should help stack the incentives for fleets’ owners; for employers; for institutions; for the tourism sector; for community and social needs transport and so on.

Some of this will be relatively straightforward, some knotty. We could perhaps have rural-focused mobility zones or super-demonstrator areas to match those the last administration was planning that largely focussed on more urban areas.

There is a set of opportunities here, and the road to net zero greenhouse gas emissions says we have to grasp them sooner rather than later. Let’s make that sooner. **LTT**

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