Attitude to buses.
Villages in remote areas of Scotland have had as few buses of any variety as one a day (and that only during-term time) or less, so the perception grows that bus travel is irrelevant, so this method of getting around is generally dismissed out of hand. The chorus is: “You need a car to live here” but since there are a number of residents, living on their own, who do not have any personal motorised transport, this is clearly untrue. What is nearer the truth is to say that those without a car, including those under eighteen and many in their twenties and thirties, are disenfranchised by the inability to travel independently even from one end of a parish to the other (Cycling long distances between hamlets, on single track or steep roads, is necessarily confined to the fanatically fit). Low wages, as well as high rural fuel prices inhibit car ownership. The car owner might say: “Folk are good neighbours and they would never see you stuck”. This is true but it does mean that the car-less will have to wait upon the convenience of their lift-giver. No matter how accommodating that person might be, their passenger has been deprived of personal choice in the way in which they can take part in community life. Many have skills, knowledge and talents that are lost to the rest of us and this includes school-leavers who may wish to stay in these villages to work.
Bus-users are human too.

Consequently, we have unwittingly created an underclass, undoubtedly a minority, but deprived of the sense of privacy afforded, by mutual consent, to the rest of us. This leads to lack of aspiration, confidence and self-determination. Consider this: Is our allocation of time only important when we need to fulfil a medical appointment? No; we all need opportunities to attend: community education classes, fitness classes, computer courses, help and advice sessions, drop-in sessions, work-clubs, career advice appointments, book clubs, bowling clubs, field clubs, gun clubs, WRI meetings, religious activities, volunteering opportunities, cafes, restaurants, retreats, football matches, highland games, historical society meetings, youth clubs, archaeological digs, hotels, wildlife ranger walks, island trips, evening concerts, ceilidhs, theatre productions, pantomime rehearsals, choir practices, harvest suppers, charity sales, whist drives, Scrabble tournaments, libraries, jumble sales, local arts markets, charity shops, exhibitions, hairdressers, meetings, internet access, learning centres, car boot sales, seasonal outdoor activities, mountains, lochs, rivers, historic sites and not least, shops and employment. All of these activities may be available in rural areas.
(particularly those relying on tourism) due to the efforts of an active, fulltime population but we cannot join in if our access is limited to particular opportunities based on the will of benevolent neighbours or within hours stipulated by councils. Being offered a lift to the bowling club is not much use if one’s major interest is natural history. To suggest otherwise reduces our fellows to a status less than human. And a disabled employee who finishes work at 9pm is not helped much by a service that knocks off in the late afternoon.

Written off.
But sadly, even among those who should know better, one hears “She’s quite happy; she’s got her telly”. I have yet to hear any health professional espouse a healthy lifestyle ensconced passively in front of a screen for up to 10 hours a day. Research has confirmed our conviction that human beings thrive in the company of those they know and trust, and that have their best interests at heart. This is a major factor in the “safer community” much touted by our councils and the same parameters can hardly be applied to television. One might just as well say, “He’s quite happy; he has his whisky” or, arguably, worse - drugs or pornography. Indisputably, all these can bring pleasure in the short term, but pleasure is not happiness. In addition, being confined to one’s home increases lighting and heating bills and, eventually, drains motivation and self-esteem and leads to loneliness and isolation.

The meaning of Fragile.
Of course, this state of affairs is not confined to rural areas, but it needs saying anyway. The Scottish Government must be aware that the preponderance of car use, as in every other first world state, has encouraged the sourcing of goods and services from out-with small towns and villages, sucking the life out of communities by forcing local retailers, bereft of a sustainable customer base, to stock cheaper, low quality goods, from a very limited range, compromising their reputation and compounding the problem. In addition, tradesmen, compelled to seek other ways of complementing their income, take time away from pursuing excellence in their own craft and may eventually give up and move out. “Modern” governments have pursued policies of “best value” (sometimes veiled as “Best Practice”) to the detriment of quality. Bowing to the power of large, faceless, and, it now turns out, tax avoiding corporations, and the buying power of bulk retailers, has robbed entrepreneurial individuals of the chance to provide local, and accountable, goods and services.

An end to social responsibility.
In the past, governments have done fine things in the name of inclusivity and equality, viz. the National Health Service and the education system. Both are freely available to all, but freely opted out of by the better endowed. These
just and admirable policies, sadly, have not, in the UK, been applied to transport. Anti-discriminatory legislation has certainly made the differently able more visible. But this new emphasis has still not put paid to the arbitrary conceptual division of transport into “public” and “community”. A recent conversation with a council officer revealed that “they’re both the same really”. I expect this comment was in the context of government grants, but it does concentrate the mind on the term “Public” with reference to transport. A quick check in the Oxford dictionary confirms that the compound expression “Public transport” is an accepted term in general use, whereas the term “Community transport” in my edition, is absent. What then is the definition of “Community Transport?” Asking around, it is clear that very few people have a clear idea and some have not even heard of it. There is a vague idea about “subsidised taxis” persisting from the time when it became apparent that those receiving benefits could access cheap fares to help them get to the shop, day centre or doctor – and little more. Again, there is knowledge of a “Hospital car”, an arrangement by which a partially compensated volunteer uses their own car to take outpatients to hospital appointments up to a hundred miles away (This to avoid them having an enforced overnight stay in the city). The fact that the car has already travelled fifty miles to get to their first client evidently raises no eyebrows. There seems to be an unconscious, unwritten, general concept that those who are enabled by “community transport” are just not quite “the public”. The real public, obviously, are those who charge about the country frenetically in overpowered, noisy cocoons emitting disproportionate amounts of air pollution. Our young folk, who are carefully guided through school, assured of the merits equality and the evils of discrimination, find when they leave that they are expected to join the “De’il tak the hindmost” attitude.

Can anyone help, please?
There is a serious lack of bus information anywhere but, perhaps, word of mouth, and then only in very vague terms. Notices sporadically appearing in bus shelters can be incomplete and unreliable. Bus operators refer to “your local travel shop” in their marketing bumf. This, when investigated, does not refer to Thomson’s on the high street but a bus company office, deeply hidden in the centre of a very distant city! Enquiries about timetables at visitor centres may reveal a small pile of timetables of the buses that pass their front door, but usually any map printed thereon does not detail where the stops actually are. It takes a seasoned bus user to learn to stand at the correct designated stop for each particular bus. Experience soon teaches us that, short of mowing the punter down, drivers are able to studiously ignore people who do not rigorously apply acceptable passenger behaviour. More evidence of the Dalit treatment of bus users is the question often asked: “Where is it that you want to go to?” followed by astonishment when the reply is “Anywhere and everywhere, anytime”, just like the rest of the public.
Council provision, thankfully. However, I am straying into “public transport” territory, so I must return to the local circumstance. It has become apparent that some councils have been operating a dial-a-bus service, but this news has been received with surprise by transport volunteers, some of whom may also serve in elected positions on community councils and ought to know. Despite the stated intention of councils to integrate and co-ordinate transport (e.g. Hitrans), there seems to be little evidence of this and no watertight system of getting the message out. Some local folk whom I interviewed informally are involved in social and health services. They can describe roughly the processes involved in this subsidized, undoubtedly well intentioned, demand-led transport provision, but dismiss it as being available to only a few people in exceptional need, who will wait until they can be fitted in. Most have not come across the term “Dial-a-bus” and a quick internet search, including the local press, reveals that a public launch of this service has been overlooked. Information from CTA Scotland, thankfully, also alludes to the fact that leaflets are available. But these can be found only in a council office and not in the places where they could be of use to the general public e.g. the Post Office, the doctors’ surgery, bus-stops, local notice boards, learning centre, leisure centre etc. It goes without saying that leaflets are available as PDFs on the council’s website but people are not likely to go there, if they do not know the service exists and have not seen minibuses emblazoned with the words “Dial-a-bus” and the appropriate phone number. It is to be presumed and hoped that social workers and health practitioners, at the point of access, distribute these leaflets, but this has yet to be confirmed. One can only suppose that this was a top-down decision, carried out as a response to requests from e.g. social services, but without actually consulting communities and I’m afraid, looking very much like “lip-service”. Such a service, at its present scale, could not support a population in transition to leaving their cars at home, as promoted by our leaders.

The resilience of the few. When one reads government transport strategies (local or otherwise), one is prepared to be convinced of intended goodwill to public mass communication systems, not least from the environmental point of view. After boats and trains, buses (and trams) are the most sustainable mechanised method. Ergo, bus passengers, far from being disdained or effectively treated as losers, should be feted as heroes! Not only do they stand outside in all weathers for indeterminate periods of time, spend months assembling fast outdating timetables from random buses, discover timetable changes only after the bus they are waiting for does not arrive, find no receptacle either below their feet or above their heads for their belongings, etc., and most frustrating of all, have to wait up to an hour longer during rush hour, due to pressure of traffic. Lip-service to environmental strategy, in cities e.g. bus/taxi
lanes, are never continuous, so any such policy will only work when buses have flashing lights they can deploy when their progress is impeded.

Unhealthy habits
So what has the above paragraph to do with “Community Transport”? It is this. There has to be a complete re-think of government transport policy which leads the way in changing public perception. We did it with our anti-smoking campaign. Smoking can be bad for us so we make it politically incorrect. Walking along and living on streets crammed with noisy vehicles emitting noxious fumes is definitely also bad for us, especially our children. Living beside and travelling along motorways causes stress, and the residue from a proliferation of chemically engineered tyres poisons our environment. Planning departments are still making pedestrians walk all the way round car parks, (or negotiating through tightly packed cars, while avoiding multiple trip hazards) and swathes of manicured grass, while commissioning heavy plant to smash through beautiful natural habitats to make way for the next acre of tarmac. Motorists (sic.) are likely to: get less exercise, leave things until the last minute (adding to stress), drain streets and roads of people (leaving crimes without witnesses), hide behind glass and become anonymous (distancing themselves emotionally from others), act much more aggressively than usual, run people over, massacre wildlife, drive for miles looking for a parking place, then act selfishly when they find one, obstruct pavements, boast about how they outwitted the radar; the list goes on. Is this acceptable!? Should governments encourage this? Why are bus companies subsidized to provide revellers (who clearly have money to burn) with transport home from the city, at very anti-social hours, but not to transport jobseekers between villages ten miles apart? Is that where community transport comes in?

Humanity of sharing the journey.
Boarding a bus, not only can we communicate with the driver and ask him questions, which are often answered cheerily and patiently, one is able to interact with fellow passengers, given a helping hand with luggage and steadied when caught off-balance; once seated, there are no further concerns about managing a large unwieldy box on wheels through dangerous traffic, no responsibility for timekeeping, no worries about refuelling or parking. There is time to sit and reflect, prepare for the next daily challenge in peace, strike up new acquaintances, write shopping lists, consult diaries, phone friends, listen to music or the radio through headphones, read or write a diverting novel, study, surf the web: all of this is possible, as well as surveying the passing world from a grandstand position. What’s not to like? So where are these benefits made public? How is the government encouraging us to engage with the humble bus? Not by planning bus interchanges as annoying add-ons outside luxurious shopping centres with a chilly row of open bus-stops against
a stone wall, while train travellers lounge in cosy waiting rooms, certainly. Let’s ask “Why did community transport come about?” Why do well-meaning, hard pushed volunteers give up hours of their lives trying to raise funds to provide this?

Because the public system does not make all the right connections. Case Study: A sixty-five year old retired teacher, having, delightedly, on the internet, found a bus journey possible from Oxford, to a destination in North-west Scotland, purchases the necessary tickets and proceeds north in mid-December. On arrival at the last substantial town, in a snowstorm, she seeks shelter in the nearby waiting room to await her connection. She is not the only passenger awaiting the bus which would carry them to their final destination, in her case, over 30 miles. Luckily, one other passenger had a mobile phone and when they were turned out of the waiting room, and locked outside in the dark, in the snow, she was able to contact her hosts and know that despite having to wait a further hour, she would be “rescued”. No information was available and there was no back-up from any transport staff. Are we to understand then that passengers are an irritating side-line for these companies? Despite, later, complaining twice to the company concerned, no apology, explanation or even acknowledgement, was received.

Picture another scene: Torrential rain, complete darkness, and miles from the nearest town, a single figure, obviously dripping and buffeted by squalls, extends a dripping hand to indicate their intention to come aboard. The bus careers forward, without a pause, engulfing the unfortunate member of the public with a wave of filthy water and sentencing them to a further hour’s wait. Does this fit with any customer service manual? Surely, this is evidence of a complete lack of respect for our fellow beings, any corporate integration or any kind of information sharing by transport providers. I wonder where one can locate their quality indicators?

What bus companies are saying:

Bus companies from time to time invite “customers” to a consultation to assess their needs. So what about the rest of us? What if we haven’t been able to actually become “customers”? Are we written off as never likely to access the service, despite being members of the public requiring transport! From the website of a major provider (and also printed on complaints leaflets), this:

“We want people to contact us rather than just stop using our services”. As if we have any choice! Our destination maybe five miles away, we may need to get there for 8am, but we’re so cross with the company that we decide to WALK just to spite them!? Ludicrous.
We need no further proof; the public is compelled to do everything in their power to provide their own mechanised transport and clog up our burgeoning road network. I repeat, there must be a complete sea-change in public transport policy.

1 Community Transport Association. A tiny cohort of hard-working people without whom community transport groups would not exist.

Jane Young
30 April 2013