

To Have To Love To Be & To Do on the 55

**How a Community Bus Service
Can Meet Needs and Build Local
Community**

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Summary of findings

Research investigated whether and how the Glenfarg Community Bus meets wellbeing needs and build community in the area it serves. It was found that the bus served an essential role in transporting passengers to key infrastructures and opportunities, being effective in doing so due to its consideration of the community's needs. Beyond its role as transport, the bus provided an important opportunity for individuals to engage with their community and local area, not only at their destination but also on the bus. The bus therefore functioned as a mobile community space, bringing people together and creating community.



Figure 1: Glenfarg Community Bus Map

National context

In Scotland, where 17% of people live rurally, transport options in rural areas are often insufficient and unreliable, causing, and caused by, car reliance.

This poses challenges for those living rurally, especially older, younger, disabled and low-income people, as public transport services are essential for getting people out of their house, maintaining mobility and physical and mental health and retaining access to essential services (Reis and Freitas, 2020).



Figure 2: Glenfarg Community Bus

Scottish people are also facing rising costs of living and the impacts of austerity policies, restricting access to essential goods and services, including spaces where people can meet and chat to others in their community. The loss of these essential spaces, goods and services compounds with transport disadvantage to increase the experiences of exclusion, isolation and poor physical and mental health outcomes for the most vulnerable in society.

Transport, service provision and community spaces must therefore be considered in relation to one another to improve community wellbeing, resilience and to improve health outcomes for rural people and communities.

Local Context

Glenfarg is a small, affluent village situated between Perth and Kinross in Scotland. Served by irregular and unreliable services by a private provider, public transport provision was poor, causing members of the community to face significant transport disadvantage. In 2022, Glenfarg Community Transport (GCT) was set up to address this issue. GCT now runs hourly buses between Perth and Tillicoultry, among other services, serving the communities shown on the map in figure 1.

Methods

A survey and semi-structured mobile interviews were conducted with passengers. The survey was available online or on paper, and gathered 106 responses. Interviews took place on the bus, with passengers who were not pre-selected, and 19 interviews were conducted in total.

This research gained ethical approval from the University of Edinburgh. All participants were anonymised.

More Than Just a Bus Service

Findings provided insights into the experiences and benefits of a community bus service. These can be understood through three categories: Practical elements of the bus, how the bus meets individuals' needs, and how the bus meets the community's needs.

Practical elements of the bus

Research participants expressed a preference for GCT buses, consistently over the other bus services run in the area and sometimes also over car use. Some negatives were also highlighted. The GOAL (Growing Older and stAying mobiLe) project, a European commission-funded project identifying the transport needs of older people, highlights four necessities for age-friendly public transport: availability, accessibility, affordability and acceptability (GOAL and Seventh Framework Program, 2012). Research data can be understood through these categories, as shown;

Availability

- The bus reaches geographically isolated areas, going off-route to pick up passengers who are unable to get to a bus stop and accessing destinations important for its passengers
- The bus is regular, reliable and generally on time
- The bus sometimes became full, preventing passengers from getting on, thus reducing its reliability
- Some passengers had issues with the infrequency of the hourly service, and the lack of evening and Sunday services
- Some areas further outside of the village remain isolated

Accessibility

- The low step and accessible seating allows access for people with limited mobility
- The non-motorway route allows the bus to stop easily in case of medical emergency
- The bus offers a door-to-door service for some passengers
- There is a bookable and accessible wheelchair space on board
- Drivers learn and meet passengers' access needs

Affordability

- Many passengers are aged under 22, over 60, or have a disability, making them entitled to free bus travel through the Scottish Government's National Entitlement Card (NEC) scheme
- Bus travel is often cheaper than driving and parking in Perth
- I collected limited data from low-income or working-age passengers on the issue of affordability.

Acceptability

- The bus is comfortable and clean
- The bus acts as a social space and other passengers and drivers are friendly
- The journey is relaxing, passengers enjoy the radio and looking at the views

Individual needs

The bus is important for meeting the material, social, activity, and emotional needs of passengers; to have, to love, to do and to be, respectively, improving or maintaining passengers' physical and mental health and wellbeing (Allardt, 1993; Helne and Hirvilammi, 2015).

To meet the need to have, passengers use the bus to access essential shops and medical services. Passengers also appreciated that the bus improved their mobility, intentionally through access to leisure facilities, exercise classes and walking routes, or as a side-effect of getting out of the house and moving around, improving their mobility and confidence.

Meeting the need to love, the bus allows people to meet or visit friends and family, and to access and be involved in community spaces, groups and events.

The bus itself also creates a space in which people can chat to others and build and maintain social connections.

The need to do, giving individuals a sense of purpose, is also met through community involvement, allowing people to ‘give back’ to their community. The bus also provides access to work, education, training, and volunteering opportunities. A few passengers discussed their use of the bus to support the service, even when it was inconvenient to them, suggesting that simply using the bus offered passengers a sense of purpose and reciprocity within their community and with GCT

“I’ve been on since day one, I was telling everyone about it. (I tell them) you have to use it or you’ll lose it.” (Patsy, Interview 6)

The bus allowed passengers to be, to live in harmony with society and the world and to feel satisfied, through improved independence, offering a safe, accessible and reliable transport option for more vulnerable passengers.

“I am visually impaired and the bus has opened up my life again” (Comment 7)

The bus also allowed passengers to engage in activities important to them, also offering a chance for an outing and engagement with the world. The bus was often considered to be a central element of the outing; many passengers would, or could, not make the trip, if not for the community bus. For some, the bus ride itself was an outing.

Community needs

This section considers the role of the bus in connecting and maintaining the community it serves.

The bus was referred to as a ‘chatty bus’, offering passengers an opportunity to socialise with others, often strangers, during their bus journey, acting as a community space. Passengers appreciated that drivers remembered, related and chatted to passengers, and cared for their needs.

“The drivers remember you... they know where people stay and drive to their doors if they need.” (Ruth, Interview 10).

The bus made passengers feel more connected to their community (figure 3), as they built connections and friendships with others on the bus or used the bus to access community spaces and events. This was especially valuable for those who had lost the ability to engage in community groups.

The universal nature of the space generally helped passengers to feel comfortable and valued in the space, appreciating its benefit for all of the community.

“It’s... for everyone in the community, when you get on the bus, everybody speaks and everybody knows you.” (Karen, Interview 14)

Some passengers contested this universality, expressing that the bus was more for some passengers, such as older passengers or those from Glenfarg, than others. This came up primarily due to the service sometimes being full.

Contentions also arose as one passenger expressed discomfort at ‘tipsy’ people getting the bus back from the pub, and another at the bus stopping where there were often drug users. One survey respondent also reported not getting the bus due to personal conflict with other regular passengers.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

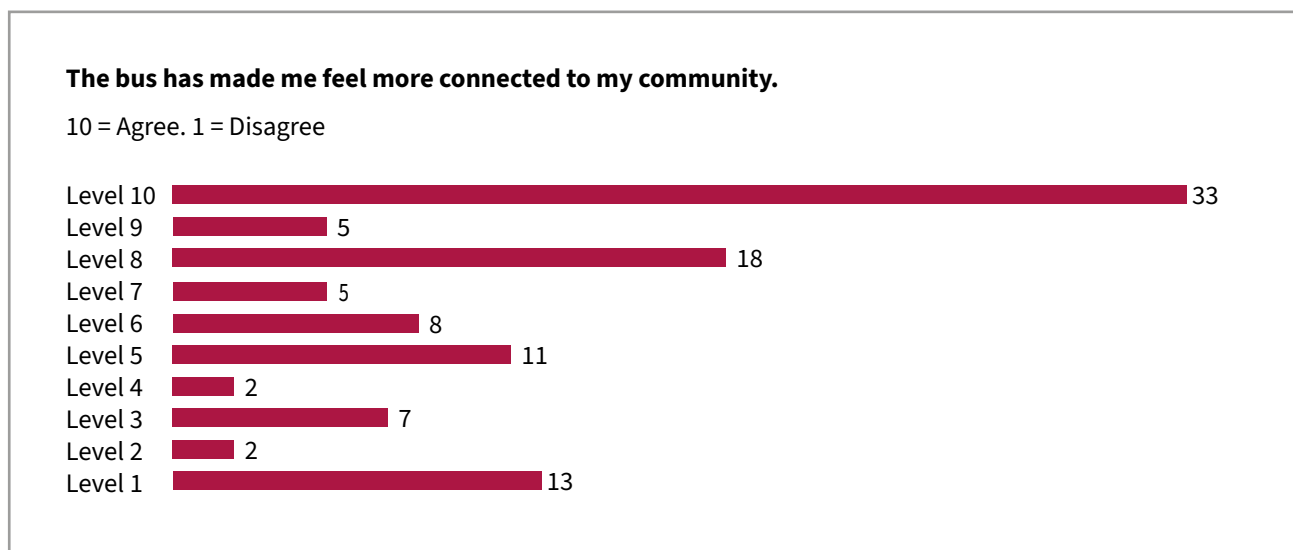


Figure 3: Survey responses on whether the bus has increased respondents' sense of connection to their community, measured on a 1–10 agreement scale.

This research shows the extensive potential wellbeing benefits of community bus projects, offering an example for other similar initiatives and displaying the benefits of funding such projects, beyond an understanding of them simply as transport. The individual and community benefits of funding such services lie in line with the Scottish Government's focus on wellbeing layed out in the National Performance Framework, which understands and measures the country's success through multiple factors, beyond economics (Scottish Government, 2026).

The high response rate to the survey and the mixed-methods approach improved the reliability of the findings, but a limitation was that the research almost entirely focussed on older and existing passengers, meaning reasons for not getting the bus, and the views of younger and working age community members, could only be given minimal consideration.

The Glenfarg community bus is an essential service for the rural communities it serves.

The bus is a “life saver”, a “lifeline,” a “social necessity” and a “vital part of the community.”

“I’d be lost now without it.”

References

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