

Tackling transport-related barriers to work in England

This study looks at the transport issues facing out-of-work residents in six low-income neighbourhoods across England and Scotland, and how these might be overcome. The summary presents findings and recommendations from the four English case study areas: Harpurhey (Manchester), Hattersley (Tameside), Seacroft (Leeds) and Dewsbury Moor (Kirklees). A separate summary details the experiences of residents in the two case areas in Scotland: Tackling transport-related barriers to work in Scotland.

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Key finding

Residents in low-income neighbourhoods are willing to travel to work but find commuting options constrained by unaffordable or unreliable public transport, especially when combined with the prospect of low-paid or insecure employment.

Actions

Coordinated action by the UK Government, combined and local authorities, transport bodies and partner agencies is needed to ensure that:

- 'Stronger' models of partnership or bus franchising (through the Bus Services Act 2017) improve the availability, reliability and affordability of public transport to make it easier to access employment.
- Planning tools and approaches ensure that new housing and employment developments are well served by public transport that reduces the travel costs, times or distances between places of residence and work.
- Transport and employment policy are better integrated to enable employment support providers to help clients understand travel choices as part of their return to work.

The research

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Background

We interviewed 54 residents who were out of work and looking for work in four locations in England. Using maps to show how far timetables suggest you can travel in different timeframes (5, 10, 30, 60, 90 minutes and so on) from these areas using public transport, we discussed the time and distances residents were willing and able to travel to work (for maps see https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1cVB00kroBN-eo_PXXqgR3CgWgow2z0IA?usp=sharing). We also considered the extent to which local transport systems were available, reliable and affordable links to potential places of work.

Key findings

- Transport is a significant barrier to employment for many residents living in low-income neighbourhoods. Public transport is often seen as something which constrains rather than enables a return to work.
- Transport issues are intimately related to the nature and location of employment. The prospect of poorly paid and insecure work limits the range of areas where individuals look for employment. Moreover, local public transport systems have not accommodated the increasingly dispersed geography of lower-skilled employment.
- There is little evidence that residents have limited 'spatial horizons' – this is where localised, cultural outlooks might constrain people's perceptions of viable commutes.
- Proximity to employment in city centres does not necessarily increase employment opportunities if the work does not match aspirations, skills or experience, and transport links to job opportunities available elsewhere are poor.

Case study areas

The research was undertaken in four case study areas with different characteristics. In Greater Manchester, Harpurhey is three miles from Manchester city centre and served by direct buses to the city. By contrast Hattersley is a classic 'overspill' estate, 10 miles from Manchester city centre with a fast but more expensive rail service into the city.

In the Leeds city region, Seacroft lies four miles east of central Leeds and is served by frequent buses into Leeds city centre. By comparison, Dewsbury Moor is a larger area made up of different settlements including Dewsbury Moor itself (one-and-a-half miles away from Dewsbury town).

Experiences of work and job search

Most of the residents we spoke to had past experience of low-paid, low-skilled or 'atypical' work that involved irregular shifts or hours, and continue to look for this kind of employment. Concerns about the quality and quantity of work led to a pervasive sense of labour market insecurity that shapes perceptions of viable commutes to work, as outlined further below.

Nearly all residents identified issues with the location of appropriate work relative to where they live, but the degree of 'spatial mismatch' was not simply a reflection of distance from areas where there are most jobs. For example, Seacroft is close to Leeds city centre but, for those seeking manual work in sectors such as manufacturing and warehousing/distribution, it remains difficult to access commercial or industrial parks outside central Leeds:

“There’s a place called Sherburn-in-Elmet and they have tons of work, big industrial estate but there’s no bus service, it’s about 13 miles away. I do not understand why they build a big estate where there’s no transport, that’s like tough, if you haven’t got a car you can’t have a job.”

Seacroft, man aged 49.

We also found little evidence that residents’ spatial horizons were limited in terms of a reluctance to travel far for work. Most expressed a willingness to commute an hour or more, although caring commitments or a preference to work in familiar areas led some individuals to consider areas that are closer. Past commuting experiences which, for many, included commutes of an hour or more confirmed a stated willingness to travel. The average commute across all modes in Britain is around 30 minutes long (Department for Transport, 2017), so these examples are significantly in excess of typical commuting times.

The feasibility of commutes

Our research found that transport can present major barriers to work by constraining perceptions of viable commutes, especially due to issues around the availability, reliability and affordability of public transport.

In terms of availability, some residents without access to personal transport observed a lack of public transport services to enable them to undertake very early or late shifts. The reliability of buses serving case study areas was also often reported to be poor, particularly in Hattersley. This impacted upon perceived commuting and employment options, with residents dismissing some journeys altogether because of the risk of delays and poor punctuality being penalised by employers.

Transport barriers were closely related to the nature of work, with commuting sometimes deemed unaffordable for those facing the prospect of low-waged work. Viable commutes were often assessed in terms of the trade-off between transport costs relative to potential earnings:

“I’ve been offered loads of jobs online [but] by the time I’ve paid for travel expenses to get there, work in a part-time job on a part-time wage, it wouldn’t be worth my while”.

Dewsbury Moor, woman aged 59.

Rail fares were noticeably higher than bus fares in case study areas, which led some to discount using trains to commute entirely, even where a direct service from a local station was available:

“It doesn’t cross my mind, it’s that far outside my price range.”

Hattersley, man aged 61.

The higher level of rail usage among residents interviewed in Scotland, where cost differentials were less marked, highlights the importance of parity of fares across modes to increase travel choices.

These transport-related barriers were sometimes intensified by individual and household circumstances. For example, caring commitments for dependent children or adults impacted on the hours individuals could work, the distance and time they could commute, and the childcare costs they could afford relative to wages.

There were also concerns among some about the support provided through Jobcentre Plus (JCP). This included reports of being pressured to apply for work regardless of the suitability of the job or the feasibility of long commutes expected under the ‘90-minute rule’. Some also noted the lack of travel planning advice:

“They do not offer any advice or support with transport issues. Every now and again, an adviser will look up the nearest bus route for you, but don’t look at the practicalities of it.”

Dewsbury Moor, man aged 30.

Conclusion

The research clearly shows that transport is a significant barrier to employment for many residents living in low-income neighbourhoods. There were multiple accounts of how employment was inaccessible because of unreliable buses, excessive fares or potentially lengthy journey times. It also highlights how transport and commuting are related to the nature and location of employment. Low wages limit commuting choices because of the trade-off with high transport costs. Early or late shifts are difficult to reach when public transport is not running. Peripheral sites such as retail, commercial and industrial parks are hard to access using a public transport system which has often failed to accommodate the changing geography of work.

The broad nature of the challenges identified means transport-related barriers to work cannot be solved through transport policy alone. Improving access to employment demands coordinated action across a range of policy areas including transport and also economic development, regeneration, housing and planning, and employment and skills. It also requires action across spatial scales involving stakeholders at national, city, regional and local level.

In England, the new institutions, powers and funding being acquired by city regions through devolution provide more tools to improve the connectivity of low-income areas. Combined authorities and new 'metro' mayors are particularly well-placed to drive this agenda forward given their central role in the devolution process, their growing focus on issues of poverty and inequality, the expertise of constituent local authorities, and their ability to co-ordinate policy across multiple policy areas.

Our policy recommendations directly address the transport-related challenges facing low-income households in their everyday lives. Stronger partnership or new franchising powers through the Bus Services Act 2017 will help improve the availability, reliability and affordability of public transport, enhancing access to potential places of work. Using spatial planning tools more effectively can reduce travel time, costs or distances if places of work and residence are better located and connected through transport networks. Integrating detailed travel planning advice within employment support will increase awareness of commuting options. Together, these changes would ensure that transport enables rather than constrains the ability of residents in low-income neighbourhoods to find and sustain work.

About the project

The study is based on an evidence review, interviews with 79 residents and 51 stakeholders, analysis of 'travel time' maps, and policy development workshops. It was carried out by a joint team from Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Sheffield between January 2017 and February 2018.

For further information

The full report, **Tackling transport related barriers to employment in low-income neighbourhoods**, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free PDF at www.jrf.org.uk

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