

# Tackling transport-related barriers to work in Scotland

This study looks at the transport issues facing out-of-work residents in six low-income neighbourhoods in the Glasgow City Region and north of England, and how these might be overcome. The summary presents findings and recommendations from the two Scottish case study areas: Port Glasgow (Inverclyde) and Castlemilk (Glasgow). A separate summary details the experiences of residents in the four case areas in England: Tackling transport-related barriers to work in England.

**Jim McCormick**, JRF Associate Director Scotland

---

## 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 Scottish Government, local authority, including via City Region and Growth Deal partnerships, transport bodies and partner agencies is needed to ensure that:

- 'Stronger' models of partnership or bus franchising powers are implemented to improve the availability, reliability and affordability of public transport to make it easier to access employment. This is the aim of the Bus Services Act 2017 in England.
- 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

By Richard Crisp, Ed Ferrari, Tony Gore, Steve Green, Lindsey McCarthy, Kesia Reeve and Mark Stevens, Sheffield Hallam University. Alasdair Rae, University of Sheffield.

# Background

Building on an evidence review that involved 79 residents and 51 stakeholders, analysis of 'travel time' maps, and policy development workshops, we interviewed 25 residents who were out of work and looking for work in two locations in Scotland to explore transport-related barriers to work. 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](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1cVB00kroBN-eo_PXXqgR3CgWgow2z0IA?usp=sharing)). We also considered the extent to which local transport systems were available, with 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 often constrains rather than enables a return to work.
- Transport issues are directly connected 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 constrain people's perceptions of viable commutes.
- Proximity to employment in Glasgow city centre does not necessarily increase employment opportunities if the work does not match aspirations, skills or experience. Transport links to job opportunities available elsewhere are poor.
- The lower cost difference between bus and train fares in the Glasgow city region encourages use of both modes, unlike the case study areas in England where more expensive train fares mean residents tend to use bus only.

## Case study areas

The research was undertaken in two case study areas with different characteristics. Castlemilk is located approximately four miles south of central Glasgow and served by frequent, but sometimes unreliable, buses into the city centre. There is employment in the city centre, but some low-skilled work is also found in more peripheral locations that are difficult to reach using public transport, such as industrial estates on the outskirts of East Kilbride. Port Glasgow is a small town located on the River Clyde in the district of Inverclyde, about 20 miles west of Glasgow. It is served by both buses and trains to a range of potential employment locations including Greenock, Gourock, Paisley and central Glasgow.

## Experiences of work and job search

Most residents had experience of low-paid, low-skilled or 'atypical' work that involved irregular shifts or hours, and they 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. While Castlemilk had regular, if not always reliable, bus services into Glasgow city centre where many jobs are concentrated, existing services did not provide direct or quick connections to other key employment locations across the wider city region.

By contrast, residents in Port Glasgow described more employment options in terms of accessible locations by rail and bus, despite being considerably further away from Glasgow city centre. This indicates that levels of employment opportunity sometimes relate to the relationship between place of residence and the number (rather than just size) of employment locations, and how well these are connected by existing transport links, but also more complicated journeys e.g. having to change buses or switch from bus to train.

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 and some had actually travelled this far to previous jobs. 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 that would enable them to undertake very early or late shifts. One former security guard, forced to give up his car because of financial circumstances, noted how this significantly narrowed employment options:

**“There used to be places I was going you would have never got to by public transport. [But now] for me to go to a particular job that was outside the city ... you're talking possibly two or three buses minimum and as far as security work, seven o'clock start [it's not possible].”**

(Port Glasgow, man aged 62)

The reliability of buses serving both Port Glasgow and Castlemilk was also reported to be poor, with services described respectively as “shocking” (Port Glasgow, woman aged 20) and “murder” (Castlemilk, man in his 50s). In some cases, the perceived unreliability of buses, especially where it involved interchange to another bus or a different mode of transport, prompted residents to dismiss some journeys entirely.

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:

**“Transport costs are an obstacle ... if it was good enough wages I would do it, but I have rent to pay and, so I would have to do a calculation.”**

(Port Glasgow, woman aged 20)

At the same time, our research found that - unlike most case study areas in England - rail fares were rarely more expensive than bus fares. This made residents more likely to use rail services where available to commute and 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 available 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':

“They just want to force you into a job that maybe you do not want to do ... they tell you to travel 90 minutes ... so yeah you do feel pressure to travel far.”

(Port Glasgow, woman aged 20)

## Conclusion

The research shows that transport can be a significant barrier to employment. There were multiple accounts of how potential workplaces were inaccessible because of unreliable buses, excessive fares or 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.

Our policy recommendations directly address the transport-related challenges facing low-income households in their everyday lives. Stronger partnership or new franchising powers 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. And integrating detailed travel planning advice within employment support – including JCP provision and the devolved Fair Start Scotland programme – 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](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

Read more summaries at [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)  
Other formats available  
ISBN 978-1-911581-39-0

Joseph Rowntree Foundation  
The Homestead  
40 Water End  
York YO30 6WP  
Tel: 01904 615905

email: [info@jrf.org.uk](mailto:info@jrf.org.uk)  
[www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)  
Ref: 3294