

# **CONTRIBUTION OF FLEXIBLE TRANSPORT SERVICES TO THE SOCIAL INCLUSION AGENDA: AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON**

*Dr Rhonda Daniels, Institute of Transport and Logistics Studies, University of  
Sydney, Australia*

*Professor Corinne Mulley, Institute of Transport and Logistics Studies, University of  
Sydney, Australia*

*Professor John D Nelson, Centre for Transport Research, University of Aberdeen,  
UK*

## **ABSTRACT**

Social exclusion is a complex, multi-dimensional concept and individuals at risk of social exclusion may exhibit more than one element of vulnerability. Increasingly there is a move to the recognition that participation in society or social inclusion is linked to transport issues. This paper is specifically concerned with the way in which public transport services, specifically flexible transport services, have been used in different countries to address different elements of transport disadvantage, with a view to increasing accessibility and thus social inclusion. Flexible transport services in this paper are broadly defined as a public transport service where at least one of the characteristics (route, vehicle, schedule, passenger and payment system) are not fixed.

Links between social inclusion and transport are examined prior to discussing the way in which flexible transport characteristics can contribute to the delivery of social inclusion. The paper then turns to an investigation of the delivery of flexible transport services in the UK, mainland Europe and Australia to identify the relationship between the institutional framework of these countries and the delivery of services and the contribution these services make to the social inclusion agenda. This is followed by a comparative commentary on the aims and objectives of introducing flexible transport services and whether or not these constitute 'normal' services, the role of national policy, the role of the regulatory environment, funding, and competition between providers before concluding in a final section.

*Keywords: Flexible transport service (FTS), Social exclusion/inclusion, Accessibility*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Social exclusion is a complex, multi-dimensional concept and individuals at risk of social exclusion may exhibit more than one element of vulnerability. The term social exclusion and social inclusion are used almost interchangeably in the literature. In this paper social exclusion is defined as the 'problem' (whether or not an individual can fully participate in society) and social inclusion is used to identify a policy directed at the problem of social exclusion or at a solution to social exclusion. Increasingly there is a move to the recognition that participation in society or social inclusion is linked to transport issues. This paper is specifically concerned with the way in which public transport services, specifically flexible transport services, have been used in different countries to address different elements of transport disadvantage, with a view to increasing accessibility and thus social inclusion.

Flexible transport services (FTS) are broadly defined as a transport service where at least one of the characteristics (route, vehicle, schedule, passenger and payment system) are not fixed. In the public transport context, this contrasts with the service which has a fixed route, fixed timetable and fare, and vehicles with drivers scheduled on a regular basis.

The first section of the paper examines the links between social inclusion and transport. Flexible transport services are defined in more detail in the second section of the paper together with a discussion of the way in which these service characteristics can contribute to the delivery of social inclusion.

The third section of the paper investigates the delivery of flexible transport services in the UK, mainland Europe and Australia to identify the relationship between the institutional framework of these countries and the delivery of services and the contribution these services make to the social inclusion agenda. This is followed by a commentary on notable issues, with conclusions in a final section.

## **SOCIAL INCLUSION AND TRANSPORT**

According to the UK Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions in its report *Social Exclusion and the Provision and Availability of Public Transport* (DETR 2000), the term social exclusion was first used in 1974 and popularised by the European Commission from 1989. Lyons (2003) confirms that this term is far from new but that its recognition and priority in planning, policy and research is more recent.

The first section which follows concentrates on the development of the concept and policy by the different geographical areas covered by this paper – that of the UK, mainland Europe, and Australia but includes information from other locations to demonstrate the way in which this issue has achieved a world-wide focus. It is acknowledged in the literature that the UK, in the setting up of a special agency and in its development of measures to identify where exclusion might exist, has made the biggest contribution to this debate. To reflect this, the major part of this section focuses on UK developments.

The second section looks at how social inclusion might be recognised and measured as an essential prerequisite to establishing the contribution that flexible transport services can make to the social inclusion agenda.

## **Social inclusion: the concept and policy development**

### *UK*

A very simple definition of social exclusion, offered by Age Concern in the UK (Age Concern 2008), is being 'unable to access the things in life that most of society takes for granted'. This highlights the way in which, despite originally being associated with income or poverty, social exclusion is a multi-faceted concept. It is now commonplace to have wider definitions of social exclusion and the current UK definition shows this in the use of the composite working definition advocated by Levitas et al. (2007, p.25) definition:

Social exclusion is a complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole.

This suggests that the key factors which can lead to social exclusion are not simply single issue based, although a single issue such as inadequate income might be sufficient to generate social exclusion. For many, it is a complex build up of issues across the dimensions of living so that social exclusion can be generated by a combination of poor access to services, lack of supporting social networks, poor living standards and poor support in health and other parts of life.

In the UK the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) was established in 1997 to assist in the development and delivery of a policy agenda covering a number of areas, including transport (DfT 2006; Lucas 2002). One of the earliest definitive statements on the linkage of social inclusion and transport by Government was the publication by (then) Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR 2000, Chapter 1, section 2) entitled *Social Exclusion and the Provision and Availability of Public Transport*, which states 'People are excluded from activities they wish to undertake *spatially*, because they cannot get there at all, *temporally*, because they cannot get there at the appropriate time, *financially*, because they cannot afford to get there, and *personally*, because they lack the mental or physical equipment to handle the available means of mobility. Subsequently, there have been numerous investigations in the UK and Europe that have reviewed the link between social exclusion and transport in different contexts. Of particular note in the British context is the SEU's land-mark report (*Making the Connections*) which focuses on transport-related aspects of social exclusion (SEU 2002; SEU 2003) and is notable for its focus on accessibility as a key to addressing barriers that can lead to social exclusion. It is helpful to

consider briefly the salient features of these two important publications before considering some of the academic literature.

The DETR (2000) report contains a useful review of the (then) current knowledge on transport and social inclusion. A key statement is that social inclusion and poverty are strongly linked and this is reflected in the literature which makes use of indices of deprivation for measuring inclusion (see for example the discussion in Church et al. 2000 and further discussion below). Poverty may be seen as “distributional” (i.e. linked to resources) and social exclusion as “relational” (i.e. inadequate social participation or lack of social integration). The report identifies “transport poverty” (i.e. lack of access to appropriate transport options) as a significant contributor to social inclusion, noting that it is strongly associated with the inability to participate in society since it can result in a lack of access to both essential and non-essential services and facilities. Importantly, it was acknowledged that travel poverty is not confined to (so-called) “excluded” areas. Measures to address transport poverty include concessionary fares, Dial-a-Ride and Wheels-to-Work schemes. the latter which provide transport solutions to individuals who are experiencing difficulties in accessing training, employment and/or educational opportunities, due to lack of suitable public or private transport.

*Making the Connections* (SEU 2003) is widely acknowledged as a significant contribution to the transport and social inclusion debate. The key word which permeates the document is “access” and the central theme is the linkage between social inclusion, transport and the location of services. The twin tenets are that citizens may not be able to access services as a result of social exclusion (e.g. they cannot use transport because of low incomes, lack of available bus routes or because of age and disability); and that problems with transport provision and the location of services can reinforce social exclusion (e.g. preventing people from accessing key services or activities such as jobs, learning, healthcare, food shopping or leisure).

Transport-related social exclusion is further defined by Hine and Mitchell (2001) with five broad dimensions: physical, economic, temporal, spatial and psychological. Church et al. (2000) cemented the linkage between transport and social inclusion which was emerging in the late 1990s. They identify that previous research draws a distinction between the “category approach” and the “spatial approach”. The category approach focuses on the travel patterns, attitudes and needs of particular social groups who are perceived to be disadvantaged in relation to the transport system such as women, unemployed or elderly. The spatial approach tends to focus on the accessibility of people living in particular areas.

Perhaps more recently there has been a realisation that the concept of social exclusion has a spatial element linked specifically to urban structural change leading to difficulties being associated with accessing employment. Dodson et al. (2006) provide an extensive review of spatial causes which can lead to differentiation between different segments of the population, leading to promulgation of social exclusion. For example, in some cities the highly paid jobs and housing have moved increasingly to the centre making it difficult for lower paid workers to find affordable housing close to where they work. Spatial mismatches can also occur when cities decentralise, as is apparent throughout the US, with suburban developments, followed

by employment, located close to freeway (or motorway) access so that the residents of the lower cost housing in the inner city face reduced access to higher quality labour markets and have longer and more expensive commuting budgets.

Preston and Rajé (2007) offer a working definition of social exclusion which focuses on constraints to participation in the “normal activities” of society. They offer a tentative theory of transport-related social inclusion which is based around the relationship between accessible facilities and social contacts. This has much in common with empirical research on wellbeing more generally. It is this definition that is used in this paper when looking at the international comparison of flexible transport schemes.

### *Mainland Europe*

Whilst in the UK social exclusion has had a central focus in policy from the 1990s onwards, the interest in social exclusion and how this can be ameliorated is evident throughout the world and in Europe by the European Commission looking for ways of identifying social exclusion in its report in 1998 (EC 1998). In Europe the policy response at the individual member state level is patchy as a result of only a small number of countries having a national-level comprehensive transport plan (notably Germany and the Netherlands). Lucas (2003) summarises the outcome of a comparative study of transport and social exclusion in the (then) G7 member states which included France, Germany and Italy). She notes in particular that whilst there is clear evidence of measures to address the issues of elderly, disabled and isolated populations, the linkage between transport and social exclusion as it relates to low-income and ethnic minority populations is generally overlooked.

### *Australia*

The Australian federal government established the Social Inclusion Board in 2008 to address social inclusion. The six early priority areas for the Board do not directly recognise the role of transport. The closest priority area is “Location approaches to disadvantage”, which is described at [www.socialinclusion.gov.au](http://www.socialinclusion.gov.au) as: “Different locations provide different environments and opportunities. Some communities are facing concentrated multiple disadvantages such as unemployment, low income, difficulty in accessing services such as health and education or poor physical amenity. A locational, place-based approach means that solutions can be tailored to their unique circumstances in partnership with the community.”

There has been extensive research in Australia on transport disadvantage. Work in Australia has highlighted the way in which transport disadvantage is concentrated in the low density and sprawling outer suburbs of large Australian cities and the extensive rural areas where public transport is non-existent. Alongside this concentration in areas where service is poor, transport disadvantage is found in the inner areas of cities where specific groups of the population, the aged, low income and Aboriginal households, have difficulty accessing public transport even though it may be of high quality (Battellino 2009).

On-going research (Currie et al. 2009) is concentrating on looking at wellbeing including the relationship between wellbeing and social exclusion identifying the transport poor as also having low wellbeing, even if they did not have high social exclusion. Moreover, this study has identified a strong link between social exclusion and social capital (broadly defined as the degree of social participation and the use of social networks) thus extending links to the transport literature which have previously been more prevalent in the health and social policy fields (for example ABS 2002 and Popay et al. 2008). Whilst social capital as a term has a history of having multiple (and ambiguous definitions) in the same way as social exclusion (Currie and Stanley, 2008, Daly and Silver, 2008), this Australian study has identified a link in that those individuals with higher social capital are less likely to be socially excluded. For the discussion in this paper, this concept helps identify the extent to which flexible transport can contribute to the building, in particular, of bridging social capital, defined as “allowing people to access multiple networks and therefore resources and opportunities” by Stone et al. 2003, as cited by Currie and Stanley (2008 p. 532), to lessen social exclusion.

### *Other locations*

In the US, much of the social exclusion literature has hinged on the notion of environmental or social justice, highlighting the way in which different groups such as racial minorities or residents of economically disadvantaged communities have an inequitable spatial distribution of benefits. The comparative survey of transport and social exclusion conducted by Lucas (2003) also includes the US context. The Transport Equity Act is cited as an example of policy measure to address the transport problems of low income groups at state level.

Following the introduction of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) there has been a large increase in ADA-complementary paratransit with Chia (2008) reporting a 54% increase in ridership between 1992 and 2004. This is because ADA funding requirements have generally precluded the transport authorities from being able to afford to provide other forms of Demand Responsive Transport (DRT). This means therefore that there has been a reduction in the provision of DRT services which are open to the general public with probable consequences for segments of the population who would benefit from door-to-door transport services.

Developing countries have also embraced the concept of social exclusion but it seems likely that in many developing countries, low income or poverty is the overarching issue leading to exclusion and that policies addressing this may need to be more direct than in societies where exclusion can arise from more multi-dimensional causes. Nelson (2009) observes that one aspect of transport provision that appears largely absent from the discussion of transport and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for Africa is the contribution of the public transport sector. This is a curious omission when contrasted with views advanced by the International Union of Public Transport (UITP) that the organisation and financing of public transport in Africa is as important to the development of African cities as access to the other essentials of health, education and drinking water (Nelson (2009). In this respect the role of paratransit and other forms of Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) service offer a particularly fruitful area of enquiry for further research and implementation.

In summary, this overview of social exclusion highlights the way in which mobility or access to services plays a key role. In this context transport can be thought of as a key policy to promote social inclusion. Transport is both part of the problem and solution to social exclusion.

## **Measuring social inclusion and transport disadvantage**

The contribution of flexible transport services to social inclusion depends on measuring both social inclusion, and transport disadvantage, both of which are difficult. The multi-faceted dimensions of social inclusion are the feature that makes it difficult to identify the numbers of individuals excluded and the spatial spread. Nevertheless, several authors have suggested some useful avenues (for example: Vidler and Curtis 1999). Lyons (2003) notes that a precursor to the question of how to collect information and data relating to social inclusion in a travel (behaviour) context is the question of what to measure. He points out that a significant concern in moving towards the issue of what data to collect relates to the inevitable practicality of targeting measurable proxies for parameters of exclusion and their potential inadequacies (see Grieco 2003).

In a UK context, for example, the collection of data associated with transport and social inclusion has become part of accessibility planning, now itself an integral part of the Local Transport Plan process. Preston and Rajé (2007) argue that a weakness of accessibility planning to date is its reliance on aggregate data and argue that transport-related social exclusion is not always a socially or spatially concentrated phenomenon. They emphasise the need to undertake extensive surveys of individual travellers which will assist in both detecting scattered manifestations of exclusion and in devising bottom-up solutions.

Church et al. (2000), in their study of transport and social inclusion in London, considered the Indices of Multiple Deprivation which did not then explicitly include accessibility measures but now consist of 32 indicators covering income, employment, health, education and training, housing, and access to services. However, Church et al. (2000) note these indicators tend to hide key aspects of social and economic stress that limit social participation and citizenship, such as lack of provision of public transport or fear of crime amongst women.

The five main barriers to accessing services identified by the Social Exclusion Unit and adopted in the *Transport and Social Inclusion: Good Practice Guide* (PTEG 2005) are the availability and physical accessibility of transport; the cost of transport; the extent to which services and activities located in accessible places; safety and security of access to services; and the travel horizons. Of these, flexible transport services primarily address the first two barriers – accessibility and cost. The location of activities is primarily a land use planning issue although flexible transport services can improve access to services, regardless of location.

Lucas (2002) identifies the late 1990s as being a crucial time when the interactions between transport provision and social exclusion began to be investigated. The term transport

disadvantage dates from this time. This term recognises both the mobility and spatial aspects of social exclusion and can be defined as where accessibility to key services is frustrated as a result of an absence of appropriate transport provision. The link from transport disadvantage to social exclusion is the way in which the lack of accessibility impacts first on the individual, for example by an inability to find an accessible job or education/training leading to low income and social exclusion. There are further costs which accrue to the individual's family and the community in which the individual resides (both spatially and socially).

The difficulties outlined above explain why there is little empirical evidence both in measuring social exclusion and more importantly for this paper, in measuring in a quantitative way the contribution of flexible transport to the social inclusion agenda. Whilst not a measurement of social exclusion itself, the on-going Australian study cited above (Currie et al. 2009) collected data that has allowed a value to be placed on increased mobility by quantifying the willingness to pay for an additional trip. The analysis indicates that at average income, a representative individual is willing to pay up to \$19.30AUD for an additional trip to engage in an additional activity (Stanley et al. 2010). This marginal value compares with the implied value of a marginal public transport trip of about \$5 AUD which is used in the evaluation of transport projects (Stanley et al. 2010).

In summary, it is clear that measuring social exclusion is difficult although there are measures such as the Index of Multiple Deprivation in the UK and the Socio-Economic Indexes For Areas (SEIFA) in Australia which can help. The UK has come closest to trying to identify and measure the multi-dimensional nature of social exclusion through a process of accessibility planning which identifies the accessibility of areas to key services or trip 'attractors' by public transport. However, accessibility planning in the UK is limited to some extent by its reliance on physical (mainly time-based measures) and does not (as yet) incorporate "lived experience" of citizens (Curl et al, 2010). Quantifying the benefits of flexible transport to the social inclusion agenda is fraught by similar issues: flexible transport initiatives are targeted at resolving geographically and institutionally specific situations and without specific place data, identifying money benefits of its implementation is clearly difficult.

The next section of the paper looks at flexible transport service initiatives in different countries. The selection of initiatives has been guided by the discussion in this section which indicates that increasing accessibility and/or, reducing the cost of travel or building social capital, especially bridging social capital are the main ways in which flexible transport services can contribute to the social inclusion agenda.

## **FLEXIBLE TRANSPORT SERVICES AND SOCIAL INCLUSION – INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON**

The first part of this section describes the characteristics of flexible transport services. The second part looks to the way in which flexible transport services have been used in the different countries or areas which are the focus of this paper. The international comparison focuses on the type of initiatives introduced and funded by each level of government



(national, state and local) and the non-government sector, and the aim or purpose of the initiative relative to social inclusion goals. Some of the services identified may not have been introduced specifically to meet the social inclusion agenda and yet might make a significant contribution in this area. Of particular interest is the way in which different countries with different institutional contexts can and do introduce flexible transport initiatives as the primary aim of this paper is to identify links between institutional frameworks and their success in providing flexible transport services to increase accessibility for the transport disadvantaged.

## **Flexible transport services for social inclusion**

Flexible transport services is an emerging term in the passenger transport field which covers services provided for passengers (and freight) that are flexible in terms of route, vehicle allocation, vehicle operator, type of payment and passenger category. Flexible transport services are used increasingly in Europe and the US as part of the public transport mix in areas where demand is too low to support conventional public transport. Flexible transport services cover a wide range of mobility offer concepts, although currently Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) is the most common. DRT usually refers to flexible transport services operated with small buses, minibuses and maxi-taxis. DRT can be either for general public use, or can be for closed user groups such as special services for people with disabilities and the elderly. In this paper, the focus is on the provision of services for the general public and the contribution these can make to social inclusion.

The development and contribution of flexible transport services can be assessed from either a “top-down” or “bottom-up” perspective. In a top-down approach, the role of transport in social inclusion is clearly identified in government strategic policy and planning documents and supported by funding agencies. Services are orientated towards meeting a social inclusion agenda, and may be developed by user consultation and focus on accessibility (both transport and physical). But the assessment of user needs is a difficult area as users invariably say they want everything but use nothing. These services tend to be government-led, even if pressure groups start the process.

In contrast, some flexible services may be operator-led, where the original motivation is to reduce operational inefficiency by reducing the number of lightly loaded buses, even when the government specifies the level of service and subsidises operations. In Australia, Telebus in outer Melbourne Victoria and LocalLink in Queanbeyan NSW are two examples where the bus operator initiated the change, but worked closely with government and user stakeholders to develop flexible bus services.

While flexible transport services can contribute to social inclusion through improving physical and economic access, a difficult aspect, from the user perspective, is the principle that public transport should be ‘for all’ and not specific groups. One definition of social inclusion is the ability to participate in society “normally”, and that includes travelling normally. There can be tension between the goal of social inclusion simply to provide access to services and activities, and the goal to provide normal participation or access, the same way as the rest of the community.

## **Institutional frameworks for flexible transport service initiatives**

### *UK*

The role of national government in the UK is primarily to provide the policy framework in which bus services operate and in the setting of nationally funded schemes such as free local bus travel for older people throughout the country. The UK bus industry (outside of London) operates in a deregulated environment in which there is a distinction between commercially registered services which operate without restriction, and subsidised services funded by the local authorities in response to meeting particular needs not met by the commercial service provision. The development of flexible services was boosted by the *Ten Year Plan* for transport (DETR 2002) in which flexible services were explicitly recognised as a feature of the public transport mix. This was accompanied by significant funding through the Bus Challenge programme in which both rural and urban bus schemes offering innovation in the provision of services competed for funds to support their introduction. In practice, 'innovation' tended to favour schemes with a technology focus, usually in the booking process, as opposed to innovative ways of tackling the social inclusion agenda.

At the level below national government, in large conurbations Passenger Transport Authorities (PTAs) (which became Integrated Transport Authorities from January 2010) are responsible for subsidising transport services over the whole area. In other areas, County Councils outside London and an increasing number of Unitary authorities [which have amalgamated all levels of local government] carry the responsibility for all areas of local government including the provision of subsidised transport services. It is rare for the local authority to deliver public passenger services and the more usual approach is to provide funding to a supplier.

A wide variety of flexible transport services are supported for general public use by these local authorities including the PTAs and Unitary authorities, in addition to the services which they are statutorily required to provide such as transport for education. The specific objectives of these services vary but most have been put in place to provide links where there are no other transport services. These include bus services with accessible vehicles which are fully flexible such as Local Link in Wythenshawe (urban) and MyBus in Strathclyde (rural), and semi-flexible such as Call Connect in Lincolnshire (rural) and U-call (now LinkUp) in Tyne and Wear (urban) (Enoch et al, 2004) The distinguishing feature of many of these services is the use of information technology in the booking process which allows the booking of services close (sometimes just one hour) before travelling. It is worth noting that many of the flexible transport services do not operate late or early in the day making them unsuitable for access to jobs. Moreover, for many (but not all) of these services, local transport fares apply (ie fares without premium) and concessions for the disabled and older people are available. In terms of social inclusion benefits, these services provide accessibility benefits to passengers as well as potential links into the wider transport network.

Perhaps less common are flexible services for the general public provided using taxis or taxi-sized vehicles. Some of the more rural local authorities have taxi-based schemes in place for

the general public, most notably, in terms of scale of size and geography are Wiltshire (Connect2Wiltshire), Devon (Devon Fare Car) and Cumbria (Rural Wheels). In many ways these operate in exactly the same way as flexible services by bus, being open to the general public, but generally fares are higher and in some cases concessions are not available. For older people this can be a serious concern as a nationwide free fare operates on local bus services. In terms of social inclusion benefits, these again provide accessibility to services and linkages into the wider network. These schemes may decrease transport disadvantage but not necessarily promote social inclusion if the passenger is at risk of social exclusion through having low income. In addition, not all vehicles are fully accessible, although some passengers find the use of a car-sized vehicle easier than many of the high stepped vehicles used on conversions to provide wheelchair accessible buses. Many local authorities provide single or shared taxi based services for special groups, usually disabled passengers, but a notable scheme, from a social inclusion point of view is the East Sutherland (Highland Scotland) Transport to Employment (T2E) shared taxi service which is restricted to passengers accessing employment, training or employment opportunities.

A number of the larger cities (Leeds, Manchester) have implemented free bus services for city centre routes to increase accessibility around the city centre and, in some cases, to provide links between stations on the rail network which serve different hinterlands. These are argued to contribute to the economic prosperity of the city more than being part of a resolution of the social inclusion agenda.

The provision of Community Transport, provided by registered charities or social enterprise entities, is variable across the country with much of the success being due to the presence of good leadership coupled with a sound knowledge of user requirements. Community Transport groups in the UK are usually registered charities or social enterprise entities. Community transport offers a wide variety of services ranging from the individual journey in a private car with a volunteer driver to fixed route services driven by paid drivers. Community Transport in some areas operate services for the general public under subsidy from the local authority in much the same way as bus operators might. There are also instances of Community Transport operating a commercially registered service without subsidy. Other non-government services include shopping services provided by the supermarket companies.

### *Mainland Europe*

This paper cannot do justice to the variety of different flexible transport services within mainland Europe that are provided for the general public. This is partly because 'Europe' contains a large number of countries and partly because mainland Europe offers an enormous diversity of examples. In terms of national policy, mainland European countries have a more regulated environment for bus operations than the UK with the majority of conventional bus services being planned and operated on a regional basis either by a public sector operator or by a mix of public and private operation under franchise. The evidence suggests that this makes it easier to introduce flexible transport services (Mageean and Nelson 2003). Compared to the UK, commitment by governments to public transport subsidy

means that networks are sustained, even where individual services might make significant losses. Culturally too, mainland European residents appear to be more public transport and less private car focussed and patronage, particularly in the cities, remains relatively buoyant.

Finland is the only country in Europe which has a national framework for flexible services. Services are however provided at a national level with many of the schemes, for example in the Helsinki area, restricted to disabled and older passengers. Other countries, such as Switzerland, have a nationally funded scheme for the general public, Publicar, using taxis but the scheme is organised and operated at the regional level. Postbus Switzerland is also an operator of Dial-a-Ride services. In the Netherlands, the national licensing of taxis has made it possible to implement two national schemes: Treintaxi and Regiotaxi. The former has the specific aim of linking passengers into the rail network whereas the latter is targeted at offering a link into the public transport network from areas of low demand.

Many of the mainland European operators are regionally based. Italy, in particular, has large regionally based bus providers that in many cases are part of public utility companies. Italy (like Finland) now has specific legislation allowing the registering of flexibly routed bus services. Flexible transport in Italy is renowned for their use of information technology in their delivery. There are flagship services such as PersonalBus in Florence and DrinBus in Genoa. PersonalBus covers the area of several previous fixed route buses and claims to have increased patronage over the services it replaced. The aim of the service was to improve the quality of service to the passengers as the services it replaced were considered to be part of the public transport network.

In terms of inclusion benefits, the flexible agency approach potentially offers a way to meet the complex multidimensional needs of individuals at risk of social exclusion by having access to a wide range of services. DrinBus in Genoa is part of a wider objective to produce a flexible transport agency where the demands of passengers can be met flexibly with different types of vehicle, bus, taxi or car sharing with each offering different combinations of service level and fares. The objective of DrinBus is to increase accessibility in low demand urban areas and its delivery is integrated with DrinTaxi, a collective taxi service which is restricted to special users (disabled and older people) and a car sharing scheme.

### *Australia*

In Australia, the federal government does not fund public transport operations, although its role and policy interest in social inclusion, urban planning and public transport is increasing.

State governments fund scheduled bus and train services, under institutional and legislative frameworks which vary from state to state. A common element of these frameworks is often rigid definitions of modes. For instance, in NSW bus operators must operate to a timetable with fixed stops, and cannot charge a fare unless accredited. Bus operators are funded by the state government to provide scheduled route services, and services to school children. Innovative, flexible services developed by bus operators and open to the public include LocalLink in Queanbeyan and LocalLink in South Coast. The LocalLink services have some

fixed stops but also divert off route to pick up door-to-door. The motivation behind the service was to reduce costs for the operator (and ultimately the government) and provide a better service to the community. In Maitland, the on-call bus service which has operated for over 10 years, was probably originally introduced to save costs by reducing empty running routes and only operating when pre-booked. In Victoria, the long-running Telebus initiative was introduced by the operator in the 1970s as a means of more efficiently serving a new low density housing estate in outer Melbourne.

However, the federal government does fund Community Transport under the Home and Community Care (HACC) program, which is administered by state governments. As the aim of HACC is to keep people in their homes out of institutional care, there are strict eligibility criteria for access to services and the program is relatively small. For instance, in NSW, the community transport component of the HACC program is approx \$36 million pa in 2009, with the state government contributing a further 10% (approx \$3.6 million pa) for community transport programs for the transport disadvantaged. In NSW Community Transport is delivered by small community transport organisations, often at the local government level. There are strict eligibility criteria for access to HACC services and only if a vehicle has spare capacity can the general public have access through a spare capacity rule. Some community transport providers have developed innovative services to better use their vehicles, using the spare capacity rule, to serve a wider range of the community. Initiatives open to the general public in Sydney include TigeRider in Leichhardt which has a flexible route with 4 fixed stops, the South Sydney Village-to-Village shopper, and South West Community Transport's feeder services on the urban fringe to connect with scheduled bus services. [check ATRF paper for examples]

The gap between scheduled public transport services for all and community transport for specific groups is not well resourced. The NSW state government has a programme of 11 Regional Transport Coordinators throughout NSW to work with stakeholders to develop services for the transport disadvantaged, (with an operational definition of being unable to access 'conventional' public transport but not falling within the criteria for being accepted onto the HACC program). There is a small pool of seed funding to fund development and trials including flexible transport services which address social inclusion., But it can be difficult to secure long-term funding and many initiatives do not continue beyond the trial period. Other states have similar initiatives to those in NSW, targeted at meeting specific community needs, such as the Victorian 'Transport Connections'. However, these tailored projects are normally small or low investment and are rarely flexible transport schemes, open to all, which are the focus of this paper.

In Australia, the local government sector does not have a legislative role in the provision of public transport, but many local governments are filling the gap in state funded public transport, by funding flexible transport services which often focus on reducing the cost of travel to users. In Sydney, Willoughby Council funds Council Cab, which is pitched between a bus and taxi and was developed as a means of providing transport services to the community at a cheaper cost than the council buying its own community bus. The council schedules and hires a taxi, depending on bookings received, with the fare being a fixed \$5 for travel within the council area. Next day prebooking is required which differentiates the

service from a “normal” taxi and avoids cannibalising existing taxi use. Parramatta Council in Sydney’s west funds a free loop bus around the Parramatta CBD to improve access to all parts of the CBD. In both cases, the aim is to reduce the cost of travel to users. Manly Council, in conjunction with the developer of a shopping centre, funds a “Hop, Skip and Jump” local bus service around the hilly council area – where it would be difficult for the bus operator to provide scheduled fixed route services efficiently. In Queensland, Brisbane Council is large enough to operate buses and ferries, and uses taxis to provide services where this is more economical, with 100 council cab services per week in Brisbane and 50 services per week on the Gold Coast. The aim is to reduce the cost of service provision to the funding agency and increase the quantity of service provision available for a given sum.

In Australia, the private sector including employers, shopping centres and venues such as clubs and pubs provide flexible transport services with social inclusion objectives. Large employers located at out-of-centre or suburban locations can fund dedicated transport such as buses or taxis (Optus at Macquarie Park, Commonwealth Bank at Homebush Bay) to provide access for their employees where public transport access may be constrained. Services are fully funded by the private sector, although they operate under legislative frameworks for bus services. The non-government sector also has an important role in providing flexible transport services for social and recreational purposes at night, an often overlooked aspect of social inclusion agendas, through entertainment venues such as clubs and pubs providing free courtesy buses to pick up patrons at home and return them home. These services allow participation in social activities, particularly at night, and enhance safety and security for patrons with a door-to-door service. Depending on the venues’ demographics, courtesy buses serve both younger and older users.

## **DISCUSSION OF DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES IN FLEXIBLE TRANSPORT PROVISION**

The review of Flexible Transport Services across UK, mainland Europe and Australia and the institutional frameworks identifies a diversity of approaches. It reveals key inter-related themes which influence the presence of Flexible Transport Services and their contribution to the social inclusion agenda including the purpose of flexible services, the audience for flexible services, the role of national policy, the regulatory environment, funding, and competition between providers.

### **Purpose of flexible transport services**

Both the stated intended, and actual purpose of flexible services relative to social inclusion can vary. Some services have a deliberate focus on meeting one or more aspects of social inclusion, such as providing a service where public transport is not available, or providing it at a more affordable cost, or providing a service in a physically accessible vehicle. Some services have an unintended benefit on social inclusion, even when this was not the primary motivation for the service. To the extent that the flexible transport services have aimed to improve accessibility, these are also addressing the building of bridging social capital and thus are likely to provide an environment where the risk of social exclusion is lessened.

## **Flexible transport services as public transport – are flexible transport services “normal”?**

Flexible transport services can be targeted at specific groups, often to meet the specific social inclusion needs of those groups which may be unable to use conventional public transport, due to availability, physical accessibility or cost. This is evident in all countries. But does this meet definition of social inclusion of participating normally in society? Flexible transport services which are open to the general public, not just specific eligible groups, have the advantage of making flexible transport services a normal means of public transport travel and participation in society. For many countries, determining the appropriate balance between the goals of access and normal participation can generate debate amongst stakeholders such as funding agencies, service providers and users.

### **The role of national policy**

It appears easier to introduce flexible transport services if there is a clearly stated high-level policy on social inclusion or accessibility which recognises the role of transport, in a top-down approach. A national policy is more effective if reinforced by a commitment to and a formal process for measurement of social inclusion and transport disadvantage, as shown in the UK. This is more important in the deregulated environment of the UK than in Europe, as Europe traditionally has a greater commitment to planning and subsidy of comprehensive public transport networks which reduces the risk of transport disadvantage.

National policy on social inclusion and transport goals needs to be supported by policy on transport service delivery by lower levels of government, whether at a regional or local. Where there are several levels of government with different responsibilities for funding and service delivery, there are greater opportunities for fragmentation leading to poorer social inclusion outcomes and spatial inequities.

### **The role of regulatory environment**

It is easier to introduce flexible transport services in an environment where there is no on-road competition between providers, such as mainland Europe. The movement towards flexible transport agencies would be difficult to implement in a deregulated environment such as the UK. However, both European countries and Australia are more regulated than the UK, but the presence of flexible transport services varies markedly. In Australia, the operating environment is low density and the regulation and funding of public transport focuses on clearly defining modal roles to encourage stability and viability of service providers, rather than encouraging innovation in service provision such as flexible transport services. In Europe, multi-modal regional planning means there is less rigidity between modes and greater innovation. The regulatory environments which have evolved reflect the differences in density and land use development. Paradoxically, flexible transport services have an important complementary role to conventional public transport which can be sparse in low density, low demand environments.

Due to the weaker institutional and regulatory environment in developing countries, the role of the non-government sector is likely to be more significant in the provision of flexible transport services in developing countries. The private sector will provide services where there is a market. This can achieve social inclusion goals by default by providing a service, if people are willing to pay but is unlikely to achieve the social inclusion goals of reduced cost, if there is no government subsidy or support.

## **Funding**

There is a danger that flexible service initiatives are trials only, expected to be sustainable or self-funding beyond the seed funding. It is without doubt that many of the mainland European schemes benefited from European Commission funding for demonstration purposes but, unlike many of the UK schemes with similar up-front funding with Challenge funds, they have survived into the long run. Flexibility and innovation must meet user needs, not be devised just to qualify for funding. Operators can also initiate flexible transport services that contribute to social inclusion, although the motivation is likely to be reducing operational inefficiency, perhaps more so than social inclusion.

## **Competition between providers**

There can be conflict between transport service providers over competition for customers. Specific modal service providers such as a bus, taxi, community transport or courtesy bus providing a flexible transport service can see other modes as a threat to their own viability, and to the established order of each mode performing its “core function” for the bulk of its passengers. This assumes that each mode has a specific role or function in the transport system, even though all forms of public transport (apart from taxis) are usually subsidised by government to provide accessibility. Where services are brokered, as in the virtual agency model, Dispatch Centres can assist with alleviating the level of suspicion between providers by acting as trusted third parties. Users themselves can have perceptions about the role or image of particular modes or service providers, which can affect the ability to improve social inclusion. For instance, a user may not want to use a service provided by a community transport bus if they perceive that community transport is for old, frail or disabled people, even though the service could address their access problems and improve social inclusion.

## **CONCLUSION**

The problem of social exclusion now has worldwide acknowledgement as does the way in which transport plays a key role in improving social inclusion. This paper has used a comparison between the UK, mainland Europe and Australia to identify the issues and challenges of meeting social inclusion objectives using flexible transport services as part of the public transport mix. It is clear that the emphasis placed both on the role of transport in this agenda and the use of flexible transport services to reach social inclusion goals varies.



The focus of the comparison in the paper has been on the institutional frameworks for transport policy and transport services delivery. The paper has concentrated on looking at services that are open to the general public for which there are no eligibility criteria since these are the services which most clearly meet the goal of universal participation in public transport.

Funding has been found to be an important factor in the longevity of flexible transport initiatives. In all the countries considered, flexible transport service initiatives have required initial funding for development. However, in mainland Europe, it would appear that the stronger commitment to public transport subsidy on an on-going basis has led to many more initiatives remaining in place in the long term.

From an institutional context point of view, it seems easier to introduce flexible transport services where there is commitment to multi-modal planning, public transport network provision and subsidy and where there is no on-road competition as in Europe. A regulated framework is not sufficient, as illustrated by the Australian case and further investigation is required to look at the links between flexible transport service provision, land use and density.

An important future direction for research is to find ways of measuring the success or otherwise of the flexible transport schemes that are in place so that a discussion can move from a qualitative appraisal to a more quantitative comparison..

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