

## **Why the transport experience is important in the context of health provision in Coquetdale.**

**January 2019**

### **Introduction**

This analysis is made in relation to the on-going proposals regarding Rothbury Hospital. The examples are specific to the Rothbury and Coquetdale area but the experience is not unique to that area. Healthwatch Northumberland has reported the experience of people in other places in Northumberland that services can be difficult and/or costly to reach by public transport and expensive to reach by car.

In looking at the transport options we have sought to reflect not just that services exist but to understand the implications for someone using the two main travel options to get to a health appointment or to visit someone in hospital. While health services may be measured from 'the hospital door' the experience for the patient, family and carers starts long before.

We have not included community transport options but recognise these form part of the overall transport system in question.

### **Background**

As part of the 2016 proposal to close the in-patient beds at the Rothbury Hospital, Northumberland Clinical Commissioning Group produced a Travel Impact Report. An updated report was presented to the Rothbury Hospital Review Group in January 2019.

This report, and any examination of public transport timetables in Coquetdale, immediately demonstrates two key facts: for many people in the upper dale there is little or no public transport **and** the only towns directly accessible from Coquetdale are Alnwick, Morpeth and Newcastle.

Healthwatch Northumberland would add that such a study should also consider the reality of using services as well as their availability and we have looked in more detail at the most likely journeys to be taken. We also consider the issue of public transport provision in the future in the face of likely reductions in funding for concessionary and non-commercial services.

We consider some of the issues of using private cars, for example the percentage of individuals of different ages that hold driving licences and the assumptions about car usage at different income levels.

## **How does the current public transport network in Northumberland enable people from Rothbury to access health services at either Wansbeck General Hospital or The Northumbria Emergency Care Hospital?**

For this analysis we have used information from Traveline<sup>i</sup>, as suggested by the link from the Northumbria NHS Foundation Trust website and the comprehensive timetable of all bus services in the area produced by NEXUS<sup>ii</sup>.

It should be noted that all journeys assume starting from a main location (eg Rothbury or Thropton) and it is necessary to bear in mind to the additional challenges of time and organisation faced getting to those starting places from outlying areas.

### **Rothbury to Northumbria Emergency Care Hospital Cramlington**

Traveline suggests a range of routes that include travelling via Morpeth, Alnwick, Gosforth or Newcastle. Many of the possibilities it suggests include a 20 minute+ walk on the final leg of the journey. Given the complexity of some of the journeys we would suggest that most people would limit themselves to taking the X14 to Morpeth followed by a bus to (usually) Guidepost and then the final leg of the journey on a bus to the hospital.

This simple journey does not seem to be possible in the early mornings when the journey becomes somewhat circuitous and involves walking some considerable distances.

### **Examples of journeys to Northumbria Specialist Emergency Hospital**

Leave Rothbury at 07:45 on service X14 bus to Morpeth arriving at 08:28. Catch the 43 to Dudley Lane departing at 08:42 and arriving at 09:13. This would be followed by a 28 minute walk.

Leave Rothbury at 10:00 on X14 bus to Morpeth. Arrive 10:43. Leave Morpeth on 10:49 service 2 bus to Guidepost. Arrive 11:00. Leave Guidepost at 11:13 on 57 Bus to Hospital. Arrive at 11:44

Leave Rothbury at 12:00 on X14 bus to Morpeth. Arrive 12:43. Leave Morpeth on 12:49 service 2 bus to Guidepost. Arrive 13:00. Leave Guidepost at 13:13 on 57 Bus to Hospital. Arrive at 13:44.

### **Examples of return journeys to Rothbury**

The return journey is not straightforward. Traveline does not show a reverse of the 'simple' outward journey via Guidepost and Morpeth. Instead it only shows journeys via either Cramlington Station or Gosforth/Newcastle. For example:

Leave Northumbria at xx:11 on Service 57 to Station Road arriving at xx:22. Walk for 4 minutes to Cramlington Rail station and take xx:33 train to Morpeth arriving at xx:42. Walk to Morpeth Bus Station to take xx:53 X14 bus to Rothbury arriving at xx:38. For example catching the 57 bus at 12:11 should, given that all the connections work, allow a return to Rothbury by 13:38

As an example of the more complex and arduous journey an individual could leave Northumbria at 15:49 to walk to Dudley Lane Cramlington (arriving at 16:17) and catch 16:18 X10 bus to

Gosforth arriving at 16:30. They then cross a busy road to catch 16:42 X14 bus to Rothbury arriving at 17:48

If the first 'reasonable' time that an individual could be expected to arrive at Cramlington is 11:44, having left Rothbury at 10:00, and allowing for a two-hour period spent at the hospital then the earliest they could expect to get back to Rothbury would be 15:38. In the course of the day they would have travelled on 5 different buses and 1 train. They would have had to make 4 connexions, 2 of them involving a walk between bus stops of rail stations. Any missed connexion would involve late arrival at the hospital and/or a potentially much later return home.

In addition to the time taken to make a return journey to and from Cramlington there are a number of other issues. Aside from the fact that many people might find a 20-minute walk, especially in bad weather, with poor health or any disability daunting, there are also issues about the lack of local knowledge needed to navigate around Cramlington.

Recent work by Healthwatch Northumberland and Healthwatch North Tyneside with people attending the Emergency Department also discovered problems with bus stops on the main roads outside the hospital and those within the grounds leading to 'missing' the right stop and having to make an additional journey and uncertainty about where to get the bus home.

There is also an inherent fragility with journeys that require multiple, and not guaranteed, connexions especially when services provided by different operators.

### **Rothbury to Wansbeck General Hospital**

A typical journey would be the X14 to Morpeth leaving Rothbury at 10:00 and arriving in Morpeth at 10:38. A walk from Sanderson's Arcade to the bus station and catch 10:49 bus to Ashington arriving at 11:07. Change buses at Ashington Bus Station and catch the 11:17 X21 service to Hospital and then 4 minute walk. Total Journey time 1hour and 32 minutes. The alternative routing suggested by Traveline seems to suggest changing buses only at Morpeth and walking for about 20 minutes between Wansbeck General Hospital and the Hirst area of Ashington

There are no direct bus journeys to Wansbeck Hospital from Rothbury. All journeys involve making at least one connection in Morpeth and some of the journeys suggested by Traveline involve a walk of up to 20 minutes. Journey times tend to be slightly longer in the late afternoon and early evening with longer waits for connections.

If we assumed a start from Rothbury no earlier than 07:45 and a minimum 2 hour stay at Wansbeck General Hospital. The issue of the time taken from arriving at the bus stop for the outward journey and arriving back at the same stop after the appointment needs consideration, bearing in mind that visiting any hospital can be stressful and more so when visiting a strange hospital after an unfamiliar journey that involves both changes of bus and walking on strange roads.

Some analysis needs to be done about waiting facilities at bus stops for people potentially travelling in all weathers, at night and in poor health or in stressful circumstances and how accessible the stops are for people with different disabilities.

Rothbury (dep)	W'beck Hospital (arr)	W'beck Hospital (dep)	Rothbury (arr)
07:45	09:29	11:59	13:38
07:50	09:42	11:59	13:38
10:00	11:32	14:39	16:38
10:00	11:25	14:39	16:38
12:00	13:32	16:04	17:48
12:00	12:25	16:04	17:48
13:00	14:32	17:09	18:48
13:00	14:25	16:25	18:05
14:00	15:32	17:49	19:48
14:00	15:25	17:49	19:48

Typical times away from the centre of Rothbury are around 6 hours.

If we changed the assumption to a 1 hour stay at Wansbeck General the following seems to be the situation.

Rothbury (dep)	W'beck Hospital (arr)	W'beck (dep)	Rothbury (arr)
07:45	09:29	10:59	12:38
07:50	09:42	10:59	12:38
10:00	11:32	12:59	14:38
10:00	11:25	12:59	14:38
12:00	13:32	14:59	16:38
12:00	13:25	14:59	16:38
13:00	14:32	16:04	17:48
13:00	14:25	16:04	17:48
14:00	15:32	17:09	18:48
14:00	15:25	16:25	18:05
15:00	16:37	17:49	19:48
15:00	16:34	17:49	19:48

Even given the shorter stay at Wansbeck General Hospital the overall return journey time is between 4 hours 30 minutes and 5 hours.

The implications for how and where different services are provided are important – for example appointment times that fit with timetables, or it could be seen as disproportionate for short, routine appointments or where extended visiting time are required.

### **Rothbury to the Freeman Hospital**

In some ways this is one of the simpler journeys involving either one or two buses to Gosforth, followed by **either** a Metro Journey and a 20-minute walk **or** a shorter walk to catch a reasonably frequent bus directly to the hospital. However, it is in all cases a journey of around 1 hour and 40 minutes in each direction for the substantive journey not taking into account the journey then needed to get back home.

## Rothbury to Alnwick

PCL Travel<sup>iii</sup> currently runs 4 return services each day between Rothbury and Alnwick with a journey time of 25 minutes. Each journey starts and finishes in Thropton.

Depart Rothbury	Arrive Alnwick	Depart Alnwick	Arrive Rothbury
07:50	08:15	09:00	09:25
09:35	10:00	10:20	10:45
11:55	12:20	14:15	14:40
15:55	16:20	17:40	18:05

This is a service operated by one vehicle resulting in limitations to the time that can be spent in Alnwick before the next return journey. If this time is not sufficient then the return must be delayed until later in the day. For example: catching the 09:35 bus from Rothbury will get to Alnwick by 10:00. If more than 20 minutes is needed in Alnwick the return journey must be delayed until 14:15 with an arrival time back in Rothbury of 14:40. The total time away from Rothbury would be 5 hours and 5 minutes. Taking the last bus into Alnwick from Rothbury only allows a stay of 1 hour and 20 minutes. Looking at the timetable clearly shows that there are real limitations to using the service to visit patients, or attend treatment in hospital at Alnwick and that in many cases an individual would need to be away from home for a considerable portion of the day.

## Changes to public transport in the future

It is clear there are a number of uncertainties, mainly arising from potential reductions in transport funding, to any bus service that is not provided commercially and in particular arising from support for concessionary fares (bus pass) from 2020. A report to the North East Joint Transport Committee on 22 January 2019<sup>iv</sup> outlined the potential impact of increasing costs and funding reductions:

*"This would potentially include cuts in discretionary services, such as secured bus services and discretionary fares. This would mean withdrawing non-commercial bus services for all ages, including people trying to get to work outside of peak travel times and from more rural or sparsely populated areas."*

It is not immediately clear which of the services used on this range of journeys are subsidised and so at potential risk. It is also not clear as to the security of the bus connections at Cramlington station and where the County Council can use its influence over the timetables and connections arising from commercially provided services.

It is possible that bus services, especially on the complex journeys illustrated in this paper, could cease, and become both more expensive for many of the older users if bus passes are withdrawn and less convenient for all users. This would have a direct impact on their ability to access services.

## Private transport

Private car ownership/usage in the Coquet Valley is reported as relatively high<sup>v</sup> but again as with public transport, we would suggest that it is important to consider the reality behind assumptions about people's current and future ability to drive to a health service.

Northumberland has an ageing population, a trend which is reported to continue over the next 25 years.<sup>vi</sup> The Department for Transport in their National Travel Survey produce statistics that show the percentages of each age group that have a driving licence. The figures for 2017 show that whilst 85% of the population aged between 50 – 59 have a driving licence the figure has fallen to 64% for those aged over 70<sup>vii</sup>. Furthermore, figures for travelling during the hours of darkness show that both the number **and** distances travelled fall with age over 55 for women and 65 for men and continue to decline with age.<sup>viii</sup> This has obvious implications for people needing to travel to appointments or visiting in the morning or afternoon during the winter particularly.

The Office for National Statistics reports each year on the percentage of households in the UK with cars by income group, tenure and household composition<sup>ix</sup>. It is clear from the ONC figures that at higher income levels many of these individuals have access to not just one car but, in many cases, to multiple vehicles. The figures at lower income levels show a different picture, where access to even one vehicle is at a considerably lower level and access to more than one vehicle is a rarity. For many in these groups access to a car will be essential if they are to work, often leaving a partner dependent on public transport or the favours of friends if they are to get to hospitals for visiting or treatment.

The figures quoted here cover a much wider area than Rothbury, and in some cases they relate the whole of the UK, but they seem to open up a series of questions about the assumption that having a car in the Coquet Valley (or indeed other areas of Northumberland) equates to access to health services at distant locations, especially for individuals in key groups, including families on low or limited incomes and older people.

## Summary

Feedback to Healthwatch Northumberland since 2017 has shown that being able to access health services from Rothbury and the Coquet Valley was seen as an issue of fairness and equity for people with particular concern for those on fixed incomes or who do not drive and where distances and weather can affect an individual's ability to travel.

What we have attempted to do is to show that a patient and family's experience of a health service does not start at the hospital door. The practicalities of getting to a service are as important. In short, we say there is need to look beyond the basic **availability** of a form of transport to the **reality** of what it means to use it, to 'walk through' the experience when planning and commissioning services.

We would suggest that the implications of the aspects we raise here, including the future uncertainties around public transport, could usefully be addressed as part of the Travel Impact and Equality Impact Assessment linked to the Rothbury Hospital proposals both for the in-patient beds and a Health and Wellbeing Centre.

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- <sup>i</sup> Traveline is a public transport route planner service provided by a partnership between local authorities and transport operators in the UK to provide impartial and comprehensive information about public transport
- <sup>ii</sup> NEXUS Nexus is the passenger transport executive responsible for the coordination of public transport in Tyne and Wear
- <sup>iii</sup> PCL Travel is a private transport company operating public transport routes in Northumberland the North East.  
<http://pcltravel.uk/index.php>
- <sup>iv</sup> <https://northeastca.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/North-East-Joint-Transport-Committee-22-January-2019-Agenda-Pack.pdf> p101
- <sup>v</sup> <https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/Northumberland-Knowledge-and-JSNA.aspx>
- <sup>vi</sup> <https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/Northumberland-Knowledge-and-JSNA.aspx>
- <sup>vii</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/729521/national-travel-survey-2017.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/729521/national-travel-survey-2017.pdf)
- <sup>viii</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/775032/2019-nts-commissioned-analyses.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/775032/2019-nts-commissioned-analyses.pdf)
- <sup>ix</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/expenditure/datasets/percentageofhouseholdswithcarsbyincomegrouptenureandhouseholdcompositionuktablea47>