CONNECTING COMMUNITIES:
FROM BUSES TO BROADBAND

Context

Too many communities face both physical and virtual challenges in connecting to and accessing services, jobs and community connections. Transport infrastructure and services are often lacking, which is compounded by a lack of digital infrastructure.

Whether in a town, city or rural community, public transport brings people together, and enables access to services like the GP, post offices and banks. Buses and trains take people to work, to job interviews, to community meetings and family get togethers. Public transport is essential to tackling loneliness and enabling participation in civic life, as well as an important part of the response to the climate emergency and a key driver of regional economic growth.

For millions of people, buses are a lifeline – and by far the most-used form of public transport. But under a privatised system that is dominated by just four large bus companies, every year sees routes cut, fares rise, and passenger numbers fall.

Digital exclusion further compounds this connectivity challenge. Despite digital technology changing all our lives, work, communities and politics, there are still many parts of the country entering this new decade without the infrastructure needed to provide decent internet – as well as households who cannot afford the high fees that private businesses charge for access. Poor internet access in fact further contributes to the poverty premium, as many of the cheapest goods and services are increasingly only available online.

The Government's own figures show that market competition in the broadband sector has largely failed. According to their research, major providers are competing for a slice of just 75% of the UK's broadband market, on the whole ignoring the rural areas which they anticipate being unprofitable.

There is a better way. Across the country, co-operative, social enterprise and other forms of not-for-profit bus operators are proving that it's possible to run bus services that are affordable and responsive to the needs of local people. By keeping routes open and fares low, community transport operators are enabling people to access work and education, tackling social exclusion and loneliness, and can be the lifeblood of isolated communities.

And as with buses, where communities have been left disconnected, the co-operative movement is leading the way in finding solutions. Community efforts to install broadband where private companies have failed mean many rural communities now enjoy access they would otherwise have been denied.

Existing policy

Telecoms

There should be no role for monopolistic private companies in delivering telecoms and broadband. The government should create new, accountable mixed stakeholder models to take over the national phone and broadband infrastructure.

Open data and digital inclusion

Government data and statistics should be made available, accessible and easy to understand – in an interactive format that means citizens can create tools and scrutinise effectively. An open data strategy should also ensure equal access to high speed broadband and programmes of digital inclusion, so that barriers to participation are removed and reduced. The Wales Co-operative Centre has led important work in this area, for example, with programmes on digital skills building.

Public transport

A green investment programme should align with a new green industrial strategy and seek to achieve a rapid and just transition to achieve zero carbon by 2030 by… investing in modern 21st Century infrastructure, including low carbon and public transport, water and energy.

Citizen voice

Those who provide, receive and rely on services are best placed to know how to ensure they are run cost effectively and to a high quality, including passengers and employees involved in the governance and decision-making on local transport.

The Co-operative Party's People's Bus campaign

This campaign called for:

- Government and relevant devolved institutions placing more emphasis and effort on developing the community transport and not for profit sectors further, by providing expertise and funding.
- Local councils reviewing their procurement strategies to ensure that they are fit-for-purpose and give not for-profit operators equal treatment.
- An extension of existing Community Asset legislation to take into account local bus services. This extension could give communities the right to designate bus routes as Community Assets this would give them more say in routes being changed or cut. This change could also open up new avenues for community right to run and community right to bid in future.

Questions

1. What does "well connected" mean to you and your community?

2. Take a look at the Party's current policy platform in this area. What policies do you agree with, which would you change, and which do you think are no longer relevant?

3. Do you believe that buses, broadband and mobile markets are functioning well? If not, what would you change?

4. How can transport and broadband connectivity be improved in:

    a. Rural communities?

    b. Urban and/or suburban communities?

5. Community transport provides services where privatised companies don't or won't. Do you have any ideas on how to make it easier to start up or run a community bus or transport service? How can we better protect existing bus routes that are at risk?

6. Providing broadband infrastructure alone is not enough to close the digital divide. What are your ideas on ensuring internet access is affordable and everyone has the skills needed to access services online?