



**co-operative
party**

CONNECTING COMMUNITIES: FROM BUSES TO BROADBAND

**ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2020
POLICY PAPER**

**OWNING THE
FUTURE**



Anna Birley
Policy Officer

INTRODUCTION

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Local parties and individual members have taken part in the consultation and contributed their ideas

and priorities for making business operate in the public good. These were all read and discussed by the policy sub-committee of the NEC.

Despite the Covid-19 crisis putting a pause to our in-person activities, members have organised discussions online, and the Party centrally hosted a number of zoom events on the policy consultation topics with expert guest speakers to enable members from anywhere in the country to engage with the issues. ●

EXISTING POLICY

There was broad support for the Party's existing policy platform in this area, including:

- ✚ 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.
- ✚ 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.
- ✚ 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.
- ✚ Westminster government and relevant devolved institutions should place more emphasis and effort on developing the community transport and not for profit sectors further, by providing expertise and funding.
- ✚ Local councils should review 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 should take into account local bus services. This extension could give communities the right to designate bus routes as Community Assets and 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. ●

NEW POLICY

In addition to reconfirming existing policy, members considered further policy areas and shared a range of ideas on what connectivity meant to members and communities in different parts of the country, how to create transport and broadband networks that are more responsive, inclusive and bottom-up, and the role that co-operative councillors can play in transforming connectivity in their local area. Members also explored the changes that Covid-19 have caused on our daily life – both in terms of the positives, such as using online tools to access meetings and

improvements in air quality, and the challenges such as loneliness, safety on public transport and access to services.

Based on the submissions, here are some new ideas for inclusion in the Party's platform:

Statement One: Community Broadband

Despite the many benefits of these community and co-operative models, there are many barriers facing communities installing broadband. The

important role that community broadband should be recognised by government, who should recognise that small providers are different and that regulations should be proportional.

Funding arrangements should be simplified to reduce the administrative overheads, and further investment in funding programmes like the gigabit voucher scheme should be secured. Support and encouragement should be given to local authorities to promote and prioritise community involvement in broadband schemes and to offer new groups advice and support.

Briefing note:

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.

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.

Co-operative and community broadband are bottom up efforts to improve connectivity. Usually they're organised as community benefit societies and raise their funding through community shares. Every shareholder has a vote in how it's run and a share in profits, once some have been reinvested in community projects.

Communities come together to install the broadband themselves, either hiring contractors or doing themselves with volunteers. Many don't pay for access like commercial providers, so they negotiate land access rights with local farmers and landowners. They might avoid going along roads – whereas BT and other providers often lay cable along highways. This can be less disruptive because roads don't have to be closed while fibre is installed.

Local parties who proposed this (or similar) policy:

-  Co-operative Party Youth Network
-  North East Essex
-  North Wales

Statement Two: A co-operative golden share

Community transport should receive proper recognition for their important contribution, with named ministerial responsibility in Westminster government and clear guidance for operators of non-commercial transport. Furthermore, given the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on community transport providers, government funding should be made available to ensure that these providers are able to play a significant role in our recovery.

In Wales, the inclusion of community transport providers in emergency Covid-19 support packages was hugely welcome – as the economy reopens and this funding comes to an end, an extension of the 'Connecting Communities in Wales' funding programme, due to finish in 2020, could support community transport providers to recover from lost revenue during lockdown and continue to enhance Welsh transport networks. Although the pandemic has changed the legislative agenda in Wales, when the Bus Services (Wales) Bill or equivalent is reintroduced, we must ensure it includes a key role and proper support for community transport.

In Scotland, there should be a national strategy, with the funding to match, to expand community transport infrastructure. The Scottish Government should work with the co-operative and social enterprise movements to ensure a taskforce is created to develop this strategy. In addition to the taskforce consideration should be given to whether new procurement regulations should be extended to ensure that Local Authorities have a duty to consider source services from these sectors when delivering bus services.

Briefing note:

Community transport is about providing flexible and accessible community-led solutions in response to unmet local transport needs, and often represents the only means of transport for many vulnerable and isolated people, often older people or people with disabilities.

Using everything from minibuses to mopeds, typical services include voluntary car schemes, community bus services, school transport, hospital transport, dial a ride, wheels to work and group hire services. Most are demand responsive, taking people from door to door, but a growing number are scheduled services along fixed routes where conventional bus services aren't available.

As community transport is always run for a social purpose and never for a profit, it is often the most reliable, resilient and accessible way of ensuring the broadest range of transport needs can be met. During Covid-19, community transport providers stepped up, supporting vulnerable people and helping to deliver food and other necessities – their social impact and community connectedness

means they are best placed to shape a fairer recovery. However, they were also harder hit than many private companies thanks to, in many cases, a reliance on volunteers who had to shield, and funding challenges faced by the wider voluntary sector through lockdown.

The current rules don't feel like they are on the side of community transport, and nor are they designed to enable community transport organisations do the best by the communities they serve. There is a challenging funding environment, competitively tendering for contracts has its own challenges as social value is not consistently taken into proper consideration. On top of this, the fact that community transport has lost any specific mention in a minister's portfolio is concerning.

Local parties who proposed this (or similar) policy:

- 👉 Co-ops and Mutuels Wales
- 👉 Islington
- 👉 Brent & Harrow
- 👉 Co-operative Party Youth Network
- 👉 North East Essex
- 👉 Chesterfield, Bolsover and NE Derbyshire Branch
- 👉 Kettering
- 👉 Richmond
- 👉 North Wales
- 👉 Chorley West Lancashire
- 👉 Sunderland

Statement Three: Improving local bus networks

If profit remains the main driver of route provision, many communities will be underserved – and this is likely to be exacerbated by Covid-19 as restrictions are placed on passenger numbers in order to keep us safe and prevent the spread of the virus. We should increasingly shift to co-operative, community and municipal ownership of buses so that any surplus is reinvested in better services or lower fares, and so that the network is developed on the basis of need not profitability, with more profitable routes able to cross subsidise essential but loss-making routes, as well as profit reinvested in continuous improvements on accessibility and environmental standards.

A "total transport" approach should be supported locally so that resources are pooled and work with a network of providers who are able to participate to meet everyone's needs, making greater use of the powers in the 2017 Bus Services Act. Local authorities should be encouraged and supported to integrate community transport into their local transport plans.

Briefing note:

The legacy of bus deregulation in the late 1980s has meant that too often shareholder pressure comes before vital community bus links - whether in our rural communities or our city and county regions.

Just five companies make up 70% of the market – just one, very stark demonstration of the systemic structural problems in local transport provision. Local people have little say and there is limited leadership from government in supporting a healthier, fairer, more responsive market.

The Bus Services Act 2017 does give some additional powers to Mayoral Combined Authorities to implement bus franchising in their areas, akin to the system operated by Transport for London. However, it has had limited uptake, with the most progress made in Greater Manchester with a move towards franchising, as well as in Merseyside. The Jersey Model has dropped its former approach of deregulated services and instead has a franchised network – as Jersey is not bound by the UK's legislation. Their services are provided by a community transport provider: Liberty Bus, part of Hackney Community Transport.

Local solutions which support a full network service are essential if people are to be able to depend on public transport. Without this, people will not change their behaviour and get out of their cars. For this reason, there is urgent need for a stronger role for LG to have the responsibility, powers and resources to play a far more significant role. Bus transport into retail centres will also be critical to saving high streets and local town centres.

Local parties who proposed this (or similar) policy:

- 👉 Islington
- 👉 Bristol
- 👉 Co-operative Party Youth Network
- 👉 North East Essex
- 👉 Chesterfield, Bolsover and NE Derbyshire Branch
- 👉 Kettering
- 👉 Norfolk
- 👉 North Wales
- 👉 Chorley West Lancashire
- 👉 Chelmsford Star
- 👉 Sunderland
- 👉 East Midlands

Statement Four: Passenger and employee voice

With a severe drop in passenger numbers during and after the coronavirus lockdown, bus routes may be bailed out by taxpayers. Rather than simply handing these routes back to the private owners, a golden share should be retained, giving passengers and employees a say and stake in services and a key role in the way in which they are procured.

Local parties who proposed this (or similar) policy:

- 👉 Islington
- 👉 Kettering
- 👉 Norfolk
- 👉 South West
- 👉 Chorley West Lancashire

Statement Five: Responding to the climate crisis

Public transport is key to tackling the climate crisis. As we emerge from lockdown, and travel habits change, we have a responsibility to create a lasting modal shift to low carbon and active forms of transport. This means a significant investment in safe, sustainable public transport, as well as space and support for cycling and walking and support for innovative co-operative car sharing and electric vehicle projects.

Local parties who proposed this (or similar) policy:

- ✚ Islington
- ✚ Brent & Harrow
- ✚ Kettering
- ✚ Norfolk
- ✚ North Wales
- ✚ South West
- ✚ Chorley West Lancashire
- ✚ Sunderland

Statement Six: The digital divide and young people

As the Party has always argued, digital inclusion must be made a priority, ensuring disabilities, special educational needs, linguistic and other barriers are mitigated through ensuring online services are designed in an accessible, culturally competent way and programmes are available to support users to access them.

The Covid-19 lockdown has shone a spotlight on digital poverty, with many young people unable to continue their studies at home due to a lack of access to necessary equipment or good internet access. Those children most likely to be disadvantaged according to almost every other social or economic measure are also most likely to be digitally excluded. There should be a digital access fund for young people, and free or subsidised Wi-Fi access for low income households – much like water companies currently have social tariffs – as well as unemployed people who rely on internet access to be able to apply for jobs.

Local parties who proposed this (or similar) policy:

- ✚ The Co-operative Party Youth network
- ✚ Bristol
- ✚ North East Essex
- ✚ North Wales
- ✚ South West
- ✚ Chelmsford Star
- ✚ Sunderland
- ✚ East Midlands

Statement Seven: Dig once

Competitive markets mean digging trenches for fibre is a costly exercise – and prohibitive for community organisations in more urban areas where the option to dig in private land, preferred for cost reasons by rural community broadband providers, is

not available. The cost of private providers digging trenches to install ducts and fibre is added to consumers' bills.

Instead, local authorities should be required, and supported financially, to install ducts whenever digging is already taking place. These ducts should be collectively and democratically owned in trust and can make the asset available to any providers including community and co-operative enterprises, with profits reinvested in improving digital inclusion and installing ducts and fibre in areas with poor connectivity.

Briefing note:

The Dig Once trust model has been developed by the Community broadband Network (CBN) and is under consideration by various local authorities. CBN has been working with Tameside MBC which has been operating its own dig once policy for over 5 years: isolated sections of duct installed in the past have now come into use.

Local parties who proposed this (or similar) policy:

- ✚ Islington

Statement Eight: Civic participation online

During lockdown, geographically isolated communities have been able to access more by virtue of civic meetings and engagement taking place online using tools like Zoom and live streaming meetings. As we ease out of lockdown, this must not be lost – local, regional and national government should continue to broadcast and make meetings available online.

Local parties who proposed this (or similar) policy:

- ✚ Richmond
- ✚ South West
- ✚ Chorley West Lancashire
- ✚ Chelmsford Star
- ✚ Southern and Eastern Society
- ✚ Canterbury

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Unit 13, 83 Crampton
Street, London SE17 3BU

020 7367 4150

mail@party.coop

 [@CoopParty](https://twitter.com/CoopParty)

www.party.coop

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