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Subject: Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence submission to the Department for Work and Pensions young people and work call for evidence
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Overview

Participation in employment, education and training is essential to young people's long-term economic and social outcomes. Evidence from the Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence's research into how this affects young people shows that transport availability, affordability and accessibility significantly shape young people's ability to take up opportunities—particularly in rural and semi-rural areas.

The Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence, established by Transport East (the Sub-national Transport Body for Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock) leads the development of evidence in support of rural transport investment and solutions.

This response provides some high-level insights from our recent research and recommendations that would provide positive outcomes for young people in rural and peri-urban areas in accessing education, training and employment.

1. About the Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence and Transport East

[Transport East](#) established the Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence to address a gap in the transport policy eco-system. Much evidence for proven transport improvements is based on research and evidence from urban areas, with less understanding, coordination or sharing of the case for or the solutions that work better in rural communities.

The [Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence](#) now works nationally with rural authorities, representative groups and academia to develop a network of expertise, deepening the understanding, increasing the evidence and advocating for improvements to rural transport. It has influenced DfT policy, the Connected Places Catapult funding for rural innovation trials and worked with other largely rural STBs to develop the [case for investment in rural transport solutions](#).

Transport East is the sub-national transport body for Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock. The partnership provides a single voice for our councils, business leaders and partners on our region's transport strategy and strategic transport investment priorities, working in close collaboration with the government and the rest of the UK.

In the Transport East region, over 33% of 3.5m residents live in rural areas, in comparison to 17% across England. 21% live along 500miles of coastline, with significant areas of rural deprivation amongst them. 2/3rds of these people live in 'transport deserts' with severely limited access to public transport options.

2. Evidence base on rural transport

The cost, availability and accessibility of transport in rural areas (both public and private) impacts several of the areas identified within the call for evidence.

This can be seen through the lens of '[Transport Related Social Exclusion](#)' (TRSE).

TRSE means that transport issues have a fundamental impact on everyday life, and that they significantly limit the full and meaningful participation in society in the way that an individual, family, or community would otherwise choose. This includes:

- Having little or no access to good quality work or education opportunities.
- Being isolated from friends, family, and community life.
- Facing financial hardship because of the cost of the journeys needed for everyday life.
- Facing poor wellbeing or mental health because of the stress caused by everyday journeys

Three population groups are particularly vulnerable to TRSE

- Those living in low-income households, particularly where one or more adults is in insecure work.
- Disabled people, and those with significant long term health conditions.
- Unpaid carers, including parents of young children

11.2 million people in England face a high risk of social exclusion specifically because of transport issues. A 14% increase from 9.8 million in 2019

Populations at high risk of TRSE are significantly more rural and coastal than the overall population and over the last 5 years this has shifted from major urban centres to less dense areas and coastal communities.

The widening of the gap between relatively advantaged and disadvantaged populations. Deprived communities have faced greater exposure to inflation in food and energy costs, and greater exposure to the impacts of the pandemic due to greater insecurity of work, a lesser likelihood of working from home, and a greater likelihood of long-term health impacts.

The Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence worked with Transport for the North to understand the challenges of TRSE in the East.

Education, Skills & Training

In 2025 we published research into the experience of young people in the East of transport linked to education, skills and training, focusing on institutions catering for rural areas. This included interviews with education and training providers and a survey of young people. [Rural Roots; Limited Roots](#) found that there are several challenges associated with using buses to get to college and vocational training providers. We are undertaking further qualitative work into this area in Spring 2026.

60% of young people responding said they used a public bus to get to college/training. NB: TE survey was conducted prior to the large-scale introduction of the bus fare cap.

For people aged 16 to 19 in rural areas

- 52% do not have a further education college within 30 minutes of public transport or walking

- 33% have one further education college within 30 minutes of public transport or walking
- 15% can access more than one further education college within 30 minutes of public transport or walking
- Biggest challenge: Long distance / travel times - young people often experience long travel times to destinations to reach their destinations, 31.5% saying it took them 1 – 2 hours to get to college/training. Often requiring interchanges or using more than one mode which increases likelihood of unreliability.
- 2nd highest challenge: Cost - Young people cannot afford to travel, especially those coming from low-income families. Over 60% of students told us they were paying up to £30 a week to get to college or training, with 12% paying more than this. The financial burden is felt to be high and with little additional support available.
- Convenience / frequency - Bus services are not being provided frequently enough, and timings of service provision is misaligned with demand. 2/3rds said they were not arriving on time, missing teaching time, unable to attend extra-curricular activities or be able to attend for a whole day.
- Communication of information - Information on transport options, links and timetables, as well as discounts and programmes can be hard to notice or find. Last minute cancellations left them in limbo and unable to find alternative travel at short notice.
- Availability of options - Bus operators have cut services, with some villages having minimal services, and service amendments mid-term leaving families in limbo with little alternative. Many said the services they needed to get were already full and would not stop to pick them up.
- Lack of connections and hubs - Lack of direct express routes and multiple hubs and connecting services.
- Safety - Young people do not feel safe using the public transport, especially in evenings when it is dark. Cycling on rural roads feels unsafe for many.
- Socialising – outside of education, 20% of respondents said a lack of buses made it difficult to socialise, which we know can lead to social isolation and multiple knock-on health issues.

Both education leaders and the students also told us that choosing a course was often determined by where they could get to. With many not being able to choose their preferred courses or places to study. One college told us they were having to replicate courses across their sites, at additional cost, to accommodate students being unable to get to the original delivery location.

This may relate to graduate retention rates in these areas, with an average in the TE region of just 21.7%, with some of our deprived coastal areas experiencing retaining just over 10% of graduates.

Quotes from Young People surveyed

“It can be incredibly difficult to attend or be on time when trains are cancelled or delayed with no replacement buses.”

“I think there should be more buses that go directly into the college campus, it is a very long distance to walk to the nearest bus stop and it can be distressing for someone with a disability or condition that makes it harder for them to walk.”

“Apprentices are not allowed to use the local 'cwa college bus' that stops in the local village (half mile from house). Instead I have to bike 8 miles to access a public bus, which arrives in Wisbech at 7:45 - an hour before college begins. I believe this would put off a lot of young people from choosing an apprenticeship.”

“It sucks to be honest. I got to get 3 different buses, and first bus are always late.”

“Limited services make staying for activities after college difficult and also sometime when I have a half day I have to wait a couple of hours for a bus home.”

“I have bad attendance at college, and this is only due to poor train services. Also some evening my train home is delayed or cancelled meaning I am stranded at a rural station for hours alone waiting for transport. As a 16-year-old this is very stressful. I am even considering leaving my course because of this.”

“I’m a wheelchair user so transport to college can be made even harder as I have to wait for a bus with the wheelchair spot, and if it's being used I have to wait for the next bus. The wheelchair journey (to the bus stop, then from the bus station to the college) and the bus journey are very exhausting and on horrific paths/roads so it is very painful.”

Barriers to Services

In 2023 we undertook a call for evidence into rural mobility, with stakeholders targeted at stakeholders and representative groups from business, visitor economy, voluntary and community sector, education, health and local authorities but it was also open to the public to respond to. 150 written and oral responses were analysed to form our [Rural Connections](#) report.

Bus service patterns mean that individuals were often required to opt for taxis for certain journeys like evening and weekend trips. Journey times are longer in rural areas, bus stops further apart and services less frequent. Also, as bus services are less well used, they can be the ones more likely to be cancelled if operators have staffing or other operational issues. This affects people’s confidence in the reliability of services to travel to time-sensitive activities such as employment, education and appointments and means many will not commit to buses for everyday journeys such as work or education.

Lack of appropriate bus-rail interchange at rural train stations was highlighted as another reason people are unlikely to opt for a multimodal journey. Rural trains stations are often away from the nearest village and without notable station amenities, including a less frequently staffed ticket office, and poor connections with other modes of transport for onward journeys.

In rural areas, like the East, public transport is viewed as infrequent, unreliable and consistently delayed or cancelled. This was backed up by our evidence either by people expressing these opinions or pointing out this perception of the network. This perception means that often people are not aware of the public transport and other sustainable services that are available to them or when improvements are made. Or, if they are aware, they are not considered a feasible choice or option when deciding how to travel.

Popular criticisms included availability, the lack of weekend or evening services, vehicle condition, choice of routes and connections with other modes.

When and where buses run and which routes get cut appeared to many to be nonsensical, missing key travel corridors, locations of key public services (e.g. health) and popular travelling times (commuting/shop closing times). Some thought this was due to a lack of consultation or not understanding travel demand patterns. Overall, 95% of individuals who responded thought a greater focus on local bus networks would improve rural mobility.

From transport operators and local authorities, the greatest challenge to running services was financial. That many rural services are not commercially viable due to higher operating costs and lower patronage has meant consistent service reductions and routes being cancelled. This means reliance on revenue supported funding from local authorities coming from central government allocations.

For example: One of our local authorities has noted that all commercial services in Suffolk are in receipt of some form of financial assistance/support from the local transport authority. Eg through home to school transport contracts as their main source of income and ENCTs reimbursement. Many operators simply would not be in business if they did not have these types of income.

Fully subsidised services account for 40/240 routes in Suffolk. But only about 2% of passenger numbers and these users are heavily reliant on them. Emphasis on provision of 'socially necessary' services which often are at a high cost/passenger.

3. In response to the questions asked in the call for evidence

A. What Is Stopping More Young People from Participating in EET?

Limited Transport Availability

Public transport coverage is sparse in many areas, especially rural locations.

Some young people are unable to reach more than one education or training provider by public transport.

In certain areas, it is not possible to reach any suitable education or employment location within reasonable time or cost constraints.

High Cost of Travel

Post-16 transport is not universally subsidised, leaving many young people to meet travel costs themselves.

Transport costs are a significant barrier for young people in education, apprenticeships, or low-paid work.

Cost pressures particularly affect those from lower-income households, limiting choice and participation.

Long Travel Times and Distances

Young people outside urban centres face longer journeys to reach colleges, training providers, or workplaces.

Lengthy and unreliable journeys reduce attendance, increase drop-out risk, and discourage participation altogether.

Dependence on Private Cars

Transport networks are often designed around car use.

Young people who cannot drive, are priced out of insurance, or do not have access to a household vehicle face reduced independence and opportunity. This creates unequal access to education and employment based on household circumstances rather than ability or aspiration.

B. What Would Make the Biggest Difference to Support Participation?

More Affordable Transport for Young People

Subsidised or free travel for young people aged 16–24 would directly address one of the most commonly cited barriers.

Reducing transport costs would widen access to education, apprenticeships and entry-level employment.

Improved Public Transport Coverage and Reliability

Increased frequency and better routing of bus and rail services to better align with education timings, particularly in rural and underserved areas.

Better integration between services to reduce journey times and improve reliability.

Targeted Support for Rural and Disadvantaged Areas

Tailored transport solutions where conventional services are not viable, such as demand-responsive transport.

Focused investment where transport barriers most strongly limit participation.

Investment in Active and Alternative Travel Options

Support for walking and cycling, including safe infrastructure and access to bikes or e-bikes.

These options can provide affordable and flexible travel for short-to-medium journeys where public transport is limited.

Stronger Alignment Between Transport and Youth Policy

Transport planning should explicitly consider access to education, training and employment for young people.

Engaging young people in transport planning can ensure services reflect real travel needs and patterns.

Key Policy Implications

- Transport should be recognised as a core enabler of participation in employment, education and training.
 - Proving social value benefits and links to economic activity which can help strengthen business cases for transport investments / funding. The changes to the appraisal process for securing transport investment has improved in the way the social value of services is understood, but well how this actually influences decisions is yet to be seen.
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- Without affordable and accessible transport, efforts to improve skills, employment outcomes and social mobility will be constrained.
 - The £3 fare cap has made a greater difference to the affordability of rural bus journeys than urban.
 - A national support scheme, similar to the concessionary bus pass scheme and one that is already offered for under 22s in Scotland. Or the Tiger Pass in Cambridge & Peterborough Combined Authority which offers £1 fares for U25s

- Engaging with commercial public transport operators to address route and fare challenges and understanding most efficient approach to address gaps in supply for demand.
- Targeted, youth-focused transport interventions can deliver high social and economic returns.
 - Ensuring that the forthcoming Integrated National Transport Strategy recognises that there is a need for a place based, properly funded and multi-modal approach to planning and providing transport in rural areas.
 - The benefits of this are not just about reducing travel times, decreasing congestion or cutting carbon, but that there will be long term wider societal outcomes including enhancing the skills, training, access to employment and life opportunities for young people in rural areas, reducing the long term benefits cost to the public purse.
- Funding appraisals have been adjusted to take a fuller view of social value, but the impact of this is yet to be seen. Government taking a longer term and more holistic view of benefits to would help ensure schemes that serve more rural communities are not overlooked in favour of those serving denser or more economically productive areas.
 - Improved active travel routes that connect to public transport routes, which can also improve long term health and social outcomes. Rural guidance and changes to appraisal methods. Cycling is an affordable and flexible way to travel, e-bike very appropriate for rural areas, how can we make these more affordable for younger people to reduce pressure on buses.
 - Long term review of how road users are accommodated in rural areas and opportunities to shift modes.

4. Additional evidence

Transport East Travel Behaviour Survey

In 2024 Transport East ran a regional [Travel Behaviour Survey](#), with 3,000 respondent which asked about different travel options. Few rural communities have direct access to a train station in the East, so the most used public transport option is bus services.

Although 46% of all respondents had access to a bus only 23% actually use it in a typical week (p16). Of those that are using a bus, 46% are using the bus more often than twice a week. (p17)

In Rural areas access to a bus drops from 46% to 30% and bus usage drops from 23% to 14% in a typical week (Transport East - Travel and behaviour survey)

Top reasons for choosing to travel by bus from all respondents.

- 45% Its convenient
- 42% enables me to get to and from where I need to go
- 41% Better value for money
- Responses from rural residents also noted the environmental impact of using a bus and the ability to relax when on a bus.

Bus users said having a bus stop very close to the start and end of their journey was very important, along with direct routes and their own safety at bus stops.

Top reasons for decline in bus use in rural areas were:

- Infrequent services
- Limited early morning and evening service
- Not a direct route or inconvenient services
- Time constraints it can take too long to get to the destination

The top ways to encourage bus use in rural areas were:

- More frequent bus services,
- On time and reliable services
- Reduced ticket prices (survey was undertaken before the wide-spread introduction of the bus fare cap)

Employment

Longer travel distances, infrequent, more expensive and less reliable public transport and poor active travel infrastructure make it harder to access employment opportunities in rural areas. This has implications not just for those seeking good quality, well-paid employment but also for businesses operating in rural areas who can find it harder to recruit and retain employees, reducing growth opportunities.

Our [Rural Connections](#) report found:

- The attraction and retention of employees is impacted by limited transport options, especially for young people.
- Economic, social, and environmental costs result in restricted access to employment, skill shortages and reduced productivity.
- Large employers' initiatives, such as sustainable commuting and collaboration with public transport providers, address these challenges. With some filling the gap with their own transport services including taxis and mini-buses with associated costs.

Health & Disability

Rural communities have poor access to health services, and rural communities in the East have poorer access than the England rural average.

76% of Transport East's rural population are within 30 minutes' walk/public transport of a GP with this falling to 69% and 70% for rural Suffolk and Norfolk, respectively. The figure for rural England is 81%.

47% of Transport East's rural population is within 60 minutes' walk/public transport of a hospital with an A&E, with this just 35% for rural Norfolk. The figure for rural England is 57%, and 94% for urban England.

Our [Rural Connections](#) report uncovered a few core issues that we intend to investigate further subject to funding.

- Transport users with mobility challenges, especially in rural areas, face increased obstacles to accessing healthcare and essential services.
- Community Transport (CT) services' crucial role in addressing gaps in public transport for vulnerable individuals.

- Poor access leads to direct health service costs, social isolation, and economic inequality. Increased coordination between national and local governments, transport operators, and health service providers could reduce costs for all organisations involved.
- Insufficient transport options lead to increased social isolation, affecting mental health, physical health and social mobility. Good transport connections are also essential for economic mobility, positively influencing mental and physical health.
- Challenges are more pronounced for younger and older generations, with particular impacts on disabled individuals.

Local Authority quote: “The people within Norfolk experiencing the most inequalities are likely to benefit most from improved access to goods and services, green spaces, and health and leisure services.”