

Transport East response to the Transport Select Committee's call for written evidence about '[Buses connecting communities](#)'

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This call for evidence by the House of Commons Transport select Committee seeks views on the Government's effectiveness of recent policy in tackling the decline in bus services. It will explore the social and economic consequences of poor connectivity and consider whether innovations in alternative service models could provide solutions. The Committee will also scrutinise how the Government's proposed bus reforms address the particular challenges faced by rural areas and local authorities outside of major cities.

This paper sets out the response to the call from Transport East.

1. Transport East response

1.1 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.

1.2 Our Transport Strategy and Strategic Investment Programme have now been completed and DfT has committed to pay due regard to the Strategy when developing future transport policy. These documents set out a vision for the future of transport in the East and a set of strategic priorities to deliver that vision.

1.3 Our vision and priorities

Vision: We seek a thriving Eastern region with safe, efficient, and net zero transport networks advancing a future of inclusive and sustainable growth for decades to come.

Priorities: To deliver the transport network to support this, the Strategy identifies four core priorities for the region. Setting out a pathway of activities to address challenges and improve transport provision.

- Decarbonisation to net zero – Transport creates 42% of carbon emissions across the region, more than any other source. We aim to achieve net zero carbon emissions from transport by 2040. Our decarbonisation pathway underpins the other three pathways in the Strategy.
- Connecting growing towns and cities – With 75 towns and cities, the East has a strong economy, but our growing places are spread out and our towns are congested. We want enhanced links between our fastest growing places and business clusters.

- Energising rural and coastal communities – Much of our population lives in rural areas or on the coast. Transport links in these areas are historically poor and this is exacerbated by poor digital connections. We want everyone in rural and coastal areas to be able to do more, more easily and more sustainably.
- Unlocking international gateways – With 13 ports and 3 international airports, we are the UK's gateway to the world for trade. We want better connected ports and airports to help UK businesses thrive.

- 1.4 Transport East welcomes this call for evidence as an opportunity to provide evidence from our region and rural communities, and to be able to influence the delivery of sustainable transport as an integral part of future economic growth and an integrated and equitable transport system.

2 Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence (RMCoE)

- 2.1 Transport East is the national STB Centre of Excellence for Rural Mobility. Through the Centre we have successfully influenced national rural transport policy development with our detailed research report [Rural Connections](#) setting out the challenges and opportunities in Eastern rural communities. We directly influenced the DfT's Future of Transport: Rural report and TE also made the case for greater funding certainty for our rural authorities, both directly to the DfT and giving oral evidence to the Transport Select Committee in 2023.
- 2.2 The call for evidence informing the report resulted in a wide range of issues and ideas being discussed. The systemic complexities of planning, designing, developing, funding and operating transport in rural areas are seen at all levels. It will take all levels of government, working in partnership to drive change. Reflecting this, and the strategic importance of improving rural transport several of these recommendations are high-level and we call on the government to work with Transport East and rural partners to identify the best way to move forward. Transport East's Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence provides the mechanism for identifying the practical next steps for these recommendations and for monitoring progress.
- 2.3 Our joint roundtables with the University of Hertfordshire have deepened the knowledge of potential viable solutions and secured access to influential advocates. Our support helped the region secure 4 of 8 grant funding allocations in the Rural Transport Accelerator Fund.
- 2.4 The RMCoE has had an incredible impact on raising the awareness of rural mobility and its challenges across government departments, STBs and LAs. The ability to bring together transport professionals, non-transport rural stakeholders, together with cross directorate government and local authority officers has shown that the interest in rural transport is vast and there is still more opportunity to progress this through continued collaboration and partnership working.

3. Transport East evidence and insight

Transport East is well placed to support the Transport Select Committee, government and DfT in delivering the best outcomes for rural transport. Through our evidence base, work

programme, regional Bus Forum and the Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence, we are able to provide dedicated insight into rural transport challenges and engage with our extensive network of organisations associated with rural issues.

The RMCoe has already successfully engaged with various government policy teams and through the roundtables developed a network of stakeholders who have an interest in rural mobility but are outside the scope of traditional ‘transport professionals’. The insight gained from this method of working has identified a number of topics for the RMCoe to explore as part of its future development.

Transport East has a regional agent-based model, (BERTIE – Behaviour & Transport: Impact & Equity model) that can be used to assess sustainability of growth from a people perspective and be utilised to assess future transport provision. As an equitable approach to modelling, it also enables us to understand where there will be positive social impacts. We also have regional analysed mobile phone data that can provide regional and local understanding of journeys to support plan development. Our connectivity studies and modelling can provide evidence of strategic infrastructure needed to enable the development and growth of an equitable and integrated transport offer for the future.

Our proposed business plan for 25-26 includes an option to model the BSIP proposals and use BERTIE to identify gaps and black spots for bus use, to understand the barriers to using the bus. Scenarios will then be developed to develop conditional outputs for running bus services and understand what is needed to be transformational. There is also the potential to develop a Social Value Toolkit for rural transport, this would enable the social impact of bus service connectivity to be assessed as part of making the case for investment.

We strongly believe that as the lead STB for rural mobility we are well placed to respond to this call. We have the necessary tools and understanding of the needs of their region (and beyond) to support the development of a future integrated transport system for rural areas, which includes at the heart of it the provision of bus services for rural areas and the communities in them. Our ability to convene partners at a local, regional and national level is part of the unique offer of the RMCoe. Which in turn will provide opportunity to work together with the Government to deliver change at scale in rural areas through the benefit of a cohesive and coordinated approach to rural public transport.

4. Summary

- Franchising is unlikely to be the right solution for all LTAs, especially those with more rural communities. There would be insufficient farebox revenue and the resourcing required to implement franchising is unaffordable for these LTAs. There needs to be a delivery model, supported by adequate funding, that allows all LTAs to enhance their bus networks.
- The funding formula for buses should reflect additional cost and complexity of running services in rural areas.

- Rural and urban areas have different transport challenges. In rural areas, lower densities make it challenging to deliver a comprehensive network of commercial scheduled bus services, and longer journey times can make buses less attractive for passengers.
- Our bus services have declined, for example there was a stark decline in bus services across Suffolk, from 1998 to 2023, with significant proportions of rural and coastal communities having all services removed. Many of these coastal areas are attractive to people retiring, who retire in good health, but experience a decline in later years.
- Lack of integration with rail in particular has been highlighted. This was a strong element of feedback received through our research.
- Government should acknowledge and recognise the different needs of public transport in rural areas, enabling DRT, CT and other “bus” options to integrate with conventional bus services will help to address the cost challenges and service demands of large rural areas.
- The integration of data and analytics within and across regions to improve monitoring, reporting and service optimisation, supports decision making and future investment.
- An integrated approach to funding and guidance across modes will enable the prioritisation of schemes and optimise delivery.
- The findings in the Transport East [Rural Connections](#) report identified specific problems for people with disabilities (seen and not seen) accessing healthcare, increased costs of health treatment due to delays in attending healthcare settings and a lack of coordination between transport and services. Employers reported problems with recruitment and retention of staff, including volunteers with some commissioning transport for staff to overcome this.
- Access to education and the choices available to rural students is impacted by lack of bus provision in rural areas, leading to social isolation, lower life outcomes and reduced participation rates. Transport East is currently undertaking research across the region with our partners to understand how this impacts post-16 students and what could be done to improve the situation for them.
- Previous funding models have not been equitable. Leaving many local authorities significantly 'behind' their neighbouring LTAs. In the Transport East region, there are clear disparities in the funding previously awarded and the outcomes being achieved in our region. This means that those living and travelling across and between local authority borders are accessing very different levels of service.
- Funding certainty is essential to deliver benefits to buses, especially in rural areas. For example, annual or short-term funding does not enable authorities to amortise the capital outlay over the life of a new vehicle, this impacts on the ability to transition to an electric fleet. We would also request engagement with local authorities for the government to understand the operating factors impacted by the allocation of revenue and capital funding, and how this impacts the ability to plan and deliver effective change.
- Transport East is fully supportive of finding new models of provision that may work better in places where traditional fixed line scheduled services are unviable or unattractive to current providers.

- Shared mobility in rural areas is lacking, forcing families and businesses into forced car ownership and therefore higher emissions from transport in rural areas. There is untapped potential for car clubs to be provided at a semi-commercial level to offer alternatives to buses/public transport where this option is not appropriate.
- EPs have improved governance through regular board meetings where LTAs and bus operators can openly discuss challenges and mitigate problems in a collaborative way. They have improved engagement with local Members and politicians and have helped to put buses at the top of the agenda.
- EPs have provided a regulatory framework for LTAs to have gained the authority to establish specific requirements for bus operators. It is recommended that any future changes to the development and delivery of bus services, builds on the established EPs.
- The Local Government Review and Devolution process will provide the opportunity for a streamlined approach to the delivery of services. There is still a need to consider how services, both buses and other transport services, are fully integrated across geographic boundaries at a suitable scale. Sub-national Transport Bodies work at a scale that would enable these cross-boundary challenges and opportunities to be coordinated, working in partnership with Local Authorities and future MCAs.
- Better integration of transport services with schools has been noted by our EP community, as is integration with other public services such as the NHS.
- Transport East is well placed to support the government and DfT in delivering the best outcomes for rural transport. Through our evidence base, work programme, regional Bus Forum and the Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence, we are able to provide dedicated insight into rural transport challenges and engage with our extensive network of organisations associated with rural issues.

5. Response to the terms of reference

- How the Government's proposed reforms of powers over buses in England, and recently announced funding, should take into account the particular challenges of rural areas and local authorities outside major cities, and how authorities in these areas can make best use of those powers and funding.**

Through engagement with our local authority partners in the East, we have identified strong support for the proposed amendments to bus regulation. Partners have noted that this would provide better design of services for rural and coastal communities, including the opportunity to have a fully integrated local transport system based on local needs.

Currently, there appears to be limited appetite for the traditional approach to entire network franchising in the non-urban regions. There needs to remain a focus on assisting these areas deliver bus service improvements through a delivery model that aligns more with their context. There is the opportunity to explore franchising of specific transport, such as Community Transport or municipal ownership of taxis, which could transform rural transport provision. The forthcoming legislation and future funding need to be flexible to allow for innovative franchising opportunities within rural areas.

Franchising is unlikely to be the right solution for all LTAs, especially those with more rural communities. There would be insufficient farebox revenue and the resourcing required to implement franchising is unaffordable for these LTAs. There needs to be a delivery model, supported by adequate funding, that allows all LTAs to enhance their bus networks. Our Local Transport Authority Passenger Transport teams, have a good understanding of what could work in their areas, for example a permission to operate model.

Funding formula should reflect additional cost and complexity of running services in rural areas. Bus mileage as a proxy is helpful, but it is based on existing services and rural services have been stripped out over last decade. Also, the rural services grant has been removed which helped support delivery.

Reforms need to address rural connectivity challenges. This is an opportunity to rethink/reform rural PT offer with flexible service models (e.g., needs based Uber model), local infrastructure investment/enhancement (bus stops/shelters, real-time information, etc) and integration with other modes. Transport should function seamlessly as a network across all modes to provide comprehensive connectivity for all users.

Changes should be made with community engagement and co-production. To understand the needs and facilitate opportunities gained through a bottom-up approach. Utilising stakeholder feedback to inform tailored service provision and community-led initiatives to address specific local challenges.

There should be specific support from DfT in preparing business cases for rural transport schemes. Transport appraisal methodology should also be updated to ensure better consideration is given to rurality and the social value and economic benefits provided to rural areas through investment in transport.

Rural transport authorities should be able to understand and easily translate the experiences of MCAs in implementing franchising, what they have learnt and how to apply best practice in their own areas.

b. The effectiveness of recent Government policy in tackling declines in bus services.

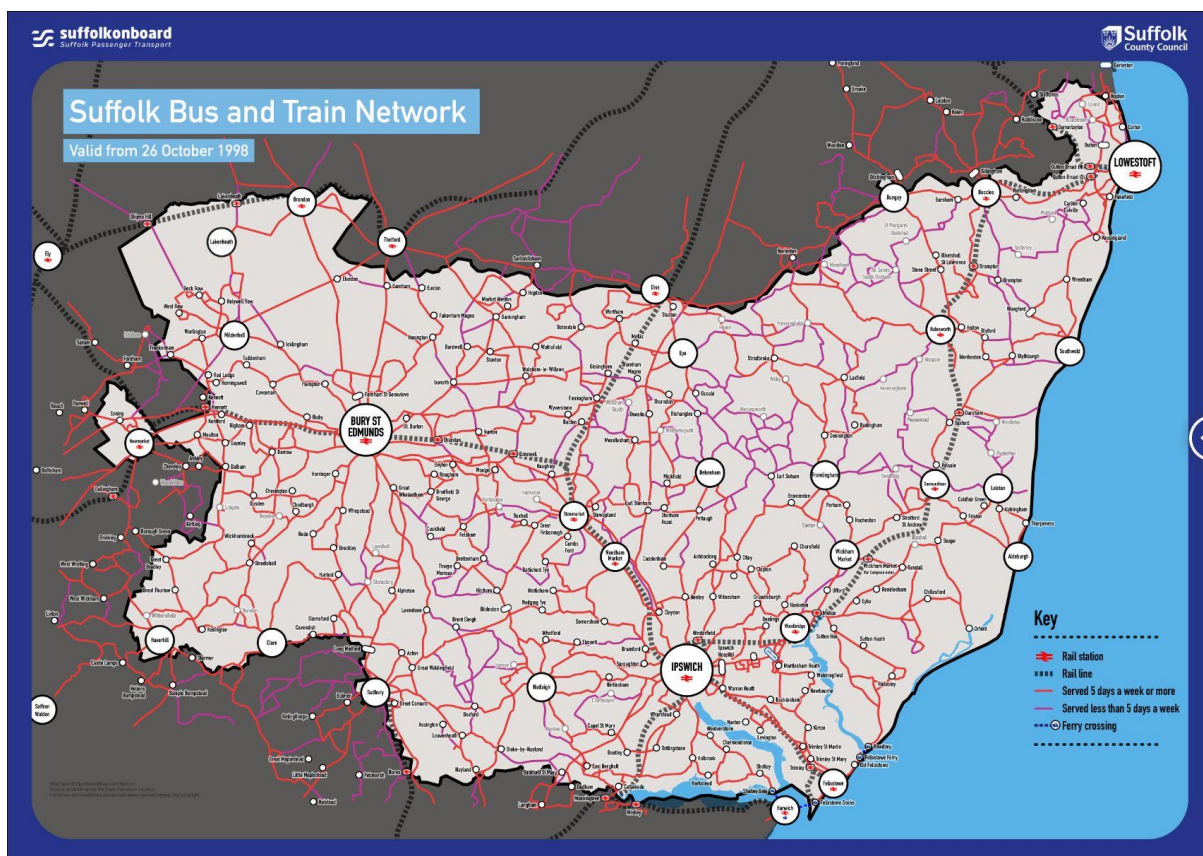
Policy should be aligned with other activity to provide an integrated approach, current policies and policy areas are delivered in isolation across government departments. The proposed Integrated National Transport Strategy provides an opportunity to do this and ensure that declines can be reversed through new policy direction, with a refreshed and revised vision of what this looks like for rural areas. Rather than a singular approach, the Government should make sure that rural transport is given due consideration and not considered as part of a general offer.

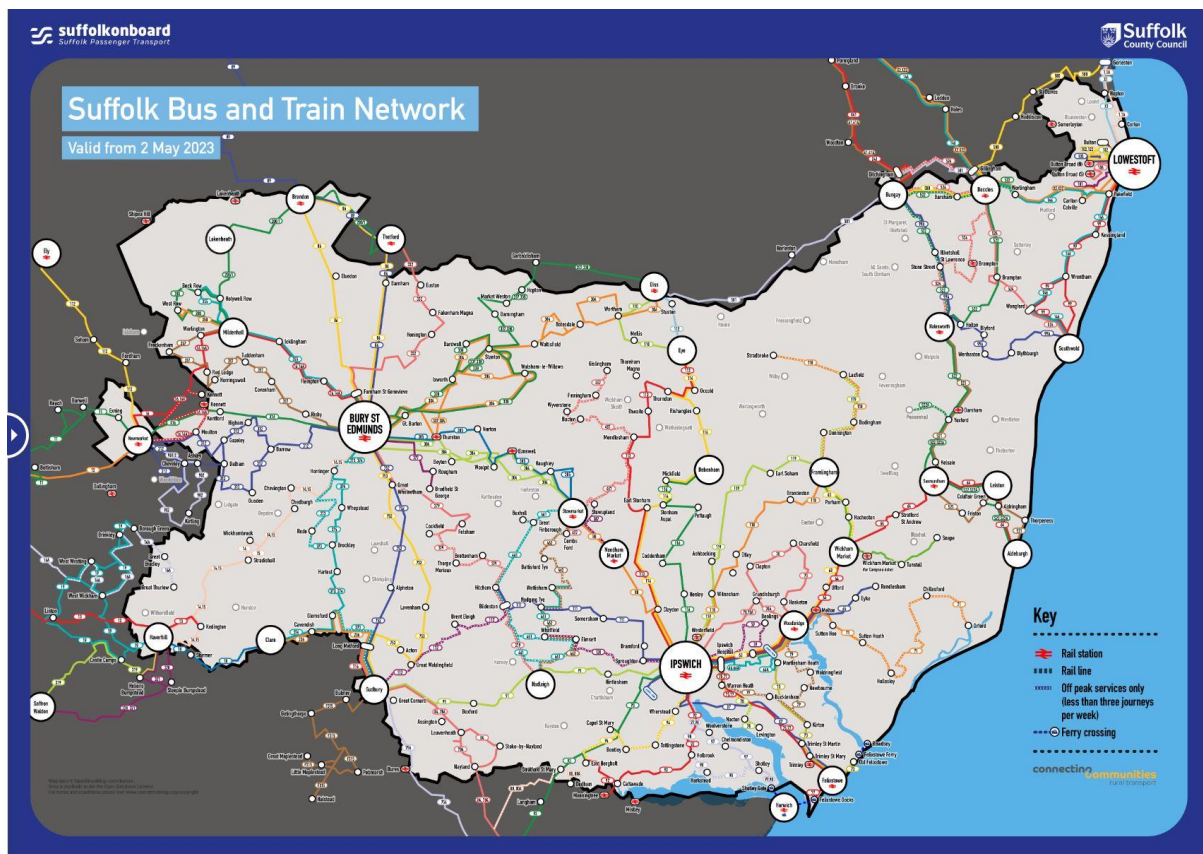
The Government must give greater consideration to the rural context when allocating funding and setting requirements and ensure that government officials are fully informed and understand the differences in assessing, funding and delivering public transport services in rural authorities.

Rural and urban areas have different transport challenges. In rural areas, lower densities make it challenging to deliver a comprehensive network of commercial scheduled bus services, and longer journey times can make buses less attractive for passengers. Our recent Travel & Behaviour Survey of the region also highlighted the lack of bus service provision early and late in the day, impacting on people's ability to undertake trips both ways for work and limiting the ability for residents to undertake evening leisure activities, increasing social isolation. This enforces the high level of car dependency in rural areas.

Yet bus services are essential for people accessing services in rural communities. Rural services often require funding support from LTAs to make them viable, placing pressure on already constrained rural LTA budgets. For this reason, bus services often look different in rural areas, including community transport, DRT, and shared taxis.

The images below show the stark decline in bus services across Suffolk, from 1998 to 2023. With significant proportions of rural and coastal communities having all services removed. Many of these coastal areas are attractive to people retiring, who retire in good health, but experience a decline in later years. With many deciding not to drive in older age, they suffer from isolation and a lack of access to essential services where these bus services have been removed. The lack of access to public transport also impacts young people, accessing education and employment, this has been evidenced from our travel survey and a current piece of work focussing on access to education and employment by young people in rural areas. Investment is needed to enable our Local Transport Authorities to 'catch-up' with those authorities that have received significant funding, in addition to the funding that will then be needed to enable the transformation of bus services in our region.





c. How effectively bus services function as part of integrated multi-modal networks that improve mobility for people who live in areas with declining services.

Many services are not currently fit for purpose in many areas, lack of integration with rail in particular has been highlighted. This was a strong element of feedback received through our research.

The opportunity to take multi-modal journeys in rural areas is non-existent. This includes access to suitable cycle, walking & wheeling routes and shared micro-mobility offers/trials. This is leading to entrenched car dependency in rural communities which has negative knock-on on economic and decarbonisation impacts.

Government should acknowledge and recognise the different needs of public transport in rural areas, enabling DRT, CT and other “bus” options to integrate with conventional bus services will help to address the cost challenges and service demands of large rural areas. The integration of data and analytics within and across regions to improve monitoring, reporting and service optimisation, supports decision making and future investment. An integrated approach to funding and guidance across modes will enable the prioritisation of schemes and optimise delivery.

Ensuring that public transport is integrated within land use planning policies will lead to better public transport provision and help to reduce car dependency. There is a need for consistency

in Central Government policy on road space allocation which would assist with the long-term planning of bus priority schemes alongside other transport schemes.

Technological innovation, the importance of leveraging technology to enhance service provision and user experience through digital platforms for real-time information, integrated/simplified ticketing, and receiving user-feedback. The importance of promoting sustainable solutions by utilising data & digital to demonstrate environmental impacts of journeys and travel choices to support carbon reduction and greener choices through gamification.

d. The social and economic impacts of poor connectivity on access to education, healthcare, employment, and social inclusion in communities, as well as on the economy of towns and villages.

The findings in the Transport East [Rural Connections](#) report identified specific problems for people with disabilities (seen and not seen) accessing healthcare, increased costs of health treatment due to delays in attending healthcare settings and a lack of coordination between transport and services. Employers reported problems with recruitment and retention of staff, including volunteers with some commissioning transport for staff to overcome this.

Whilst there is quantitative data available from local and national datasets, such as time and distance to services, there is little evidence at a regional or national level on specific rural lack of connectivity and how this impacts on various outcomes for these areas.

Access to education and the choices available to rural students is impacted by lack of bus provision in rural areas, leading to social isolation, lower life outcomes and reduced participation rates. Transport East is currently undertaking research across the region with our partners to understand how this impacts post-16 students and what could be done to improve the situation for them. We received over 1000 responses to our student survey, with many indicating public transport as a defining factor. The report will be published in spring 2025

Where case studies/news stories exist, they tend to be isolated cases which do not show the full scale of the multiple layers of impacts across individuals, families, communities and wider networks eg the business community.

Housing in peri-urban areas tends to be lower cost, but residents spend more on transport to access urban based services.

Choice of education and employment are often led by access to transport services, or lack of, which impacts on ability to have life choices and long-term impacts.

The cost of bus services, now that the fare cap has increased, means that there is less incentive for many to choose the bus. There is evidence that people favour taxis, offering on-demand, door to door options as an equally cost-effective alternative to group travel on buses.

e. The effectiveness of current funding models and governance structures in enabling local transport authorities and commercial operators to improve, sustain and keep bus services outside major metropolitan areas affordable, and the potential effectiveness of alternatives.

Previous funding models have not been equitable. Leaving many local authorities significantly 'behind' their neighbouring LTAs. In the Transport East region, there are clear disparities in the funding previously awarded and the outcomes being achieved in our region. Meaning that those living and travelling across and between local authority borders are accessing very different levels of service.

The fare cap, where operators have joined the scheme, has been positive in terms of the cost per mile travelled for people travelling from rural areas to access services. Our partners have indicated that for all forms of public transport, including community transport and demand responsive transport, a subsidy will still be needed to enable provision.

We recommend funding allocation that considers the challenges of rural and smaller urban areas - based on specific needs of rural/dispersed communities. For example; needs-based funding allocated based on factors such as geographic isolation and existing service levels and longer-term financial support of funding security to ensure continuity and reliability of services in rural areas.

Funding certainty is essential to deliver benefits to buses, especially in rural areas. For example, annual or short-term funding does not enable authorities to amortise the capital outlay over the life of a new vehicle, this impacts on the ability to transition to an electric fleet. We would also request engagement with local authorities for the government to understand the operating factors impacted by the allocation of revenue and capital funding, and how this impacts the ability to plan and deliver effective change.

To improve the public perception of buses, which are reported as being unreliable and inconvenient, Central Government could launch targeted advertising campaigns emphasising the cost-effectiveness, convenience and environmental benefits of bus travel. By highlighting how buses contribute to reducing carbon emissions and traffic congestion, the campaigns could position bus travel as a green and responsible choice. Promoting passenger benefits like free Wi-Fi and comfortable seating, along with the financial savings compared to driving, can make buses more appealing to a wider audience.

Respondents to our rural call for evidence noted a lack of coordination across both commercial bus services, local authority adult social care transport, home to school transport and non-emergency patient transport. They felt public monies could be better utilised to provide more coordinated service delivery and make better use of existing assets in their areas. Citing vehicles being unused when they could be delivering other transport offerings as an example.

There are examples in the Transport East region where local DRT and CT services are having positive impact in their local communities, such as Katch, Buzzabout, Digi-Go and FlexiBus+. Some of these are part of the RMF pilots, with others being funded through local contributions. The Government should be provided with robust evidence of how these schemes operate, not just through the evaluation of the RMF pilots but also by gathering standard information from the other schemes being delivered through district councils and charities.

f. Evaluating the potential of alternative service models, including Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) and community transport, and other innovations or technologies which could support or replace buses serving less populated communities, and what steps the Government should take to support them.

Transport East is fully supportive of finding new models of provision that may work better in places where traditional fixed line scheduled services are unviable or unattractive to current providers.

DRT schemes have been highlighted to us as a welcome flexible option for rural areas. However, due to the nature of the schemes (and also community transport), it is important that future innovation seeks to simplify and unify the 'backend' systems to maximise the potential of such schemes. This would help to unify the sector and offer potential cost savings when operating them.

There are emerging examples of this in the Rural Mobility Fund pilots and we look forward to the publication of the evaluation of the pilots.

The government should consider funding trials of new service provision specifically for rural areas, with a 'sandbox' approach, where existing legislation is not used, in order to test and prove the efficiency of such approaches. (Eg similar to approach taken with e-scooters)

Shared mobility in rural areas is lacking, forcing families and businesses into forced car ownership and therefore higher emissions from transport in rural areas. There is untapped potential for car clubs to be provided at a semi-commercial level to offer alternatives to buses/public transport where this option is not appropriate. Examples of grass roots solutions do exist, but they need to be scaled up to be available in many areas with a coordinated offer.

g. How successful Enhanced Partnerships (EPs) have been so far in improving bus services outside major urban areas, whether franchising is likely to provide a better framework for these areas, and whether there are alternative models worth exploring.

In July 2024, the Sub-national Transport Bodies (STBs) for the Wider South-East area - Transport East, Transport for the South-East and England's Economic Heartland - alongside Suffolk County Council and the Bus Centre of Excellence, brought together Enhanced Partnership Chairs and Managers and key bus organisations from across the three regions.

It was an opportunity to share learnings and experiences, and to identify ways to maximise the impact of EPs in the future for the benefit of all. This event was the first of its kind, and there are aims to hold similar events across other regions.

The outcomes from this meeting have been compiled into a [report](#) which summarises the shared experiences and views of those who attended; and recommends what wider policy and legislative support is needed to strengthen Enhanced Partnerships going forward.

EPs have strengthened relationships between LTAs and bus operators. The EP framework has empowered bus operators to be more actively engaged in the areas where they are providing services.

Currently, there is limited appetite for entire network franchising in the regions. There needs to remain a focus on assisting these areas deliver bus service improvements through a delivery model that aligns more with their context. There is the opportunity to explore franchising of specific transport, such as Community Transport or municipal ownership of taxis, which could transform rural transport provision. The legislation needs to be flexible to allow for franchising opportunities within rural areas.

EPs have improved governance through regular board meetings where LTAs and bus operators can openly discuss challenges and mitigate problems in a collaborative way. They have improved engagement with local Members and politicians and have helped to put buses at the top of the agenda.

EPs have provided a regulatory framework for LTAs to have gained the authority to establish specific requirements for bus operators. It is recommended that any future changes to the development and delivery of bus services, builds on the established EPs.

h. How well policy, funding and oversight of bus services allow services that straddle rural and non-rural areas, and local government boundaries, to be managed.

The Local Government Review and Devolution process will provide the opportunity for a streamlined approach to the delivery of services. There is still a need to consider how services, both buses and other transport services, are fully integrated across geographic boundaries at a suitable scale. Sub-national Transport Bodies work at a scale that would enable these cross-boundary challenges and opportunities to be coordinated, working in partnership with Local Authorities and future MCAs.

Total Transport involves integrating transport services that are currently commissioned by different central and local government agencies - and delivered by different operators. For buses the aim is to improve passenger transport in isolated communities by allocating existing resources more efficiently to access healthcare, education and other essential destinations.

Better integration of transport services with schools has been noted by our EP community, as is integration with other public services such as the NHS. There are currently issues with schools changing their start/end times without notice which advertently means that the bus services no longer align with the timings to benefit staff, students and parents. There is a call for school hours to be set centrally to ensure bus services are reliable long-term, and that LTAs have more control over home-to-school transport. Better integration of health services including patient transport with bus service planning could also result in financial efficiencies and improved service outcomes.

There are significant opportunities to be made by integrating transport delivery across these services at a local level. Local decision makers will be best placed to identify how and where this

is done, if provided with the correct policy and legislative tools to do so. Providing efficiency savings to a range of public sector partners and supporting local businesses through innovative delivery models.

Resourcing in local authorities will need to be reviewed and supported, to ensure that officers are well placed to be able to deal with the requirements associated with forthcoming changes to policy may be managed. This is not limited to procurement, innovation, working with innovative SMEs and delivery of new service models. We would support this through our existing regional EP group and the wider South-East STB Bus partnership.

End