TRANSPORTEAST

RURAL CONNECTIONS

Transport challenges and opportunities for communities in the East

MARCH | 2024

Foreword

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We know what good quality transport connections means to people. Increased opportunities for education, jobs, social connections, health and wellbeing. Having transport options gives people the flexibility to be able to live their life as they choose and maintain their independence when they get older.

However, people living in rural areas have limited transport options which limits life chances and creates car dependence. Over decades rural communities have seen their local transport connections diminished. In the East we wanted to understand in detail how transport provision in rural areas impacts people and businesses, and explore opportunities for how central government, local government and regional partners can work together more effectively to improve connections for rural communities.

Through this Call for Evidence process, we've heard from businesses struggling to recruit, train and retain employees and volunteers.

We've heard from educational institutions supporting rural students in accessing training and study because they know a young person's future opportunities relies on them getting to their classes.

We've heard from charities who struggle with limited funds to cover transport provision for isolated older and vulnerable people when bus services are withdrawn at short notice.

We've heard from local authorities who are working hard to maintain and improve services with little ability to plan due to short-term and competitive funding settlements.

We've heard from places with high numbers of visitors about the pressure this puts on local transport networks, making local journeys unreliable despite the value visitors bring to rural and coastal economies.

We've heard from individuals whose lives have been made harder, whose worlds have been made smaller and whose choices have been constrained because they can't leave their village easily.

On a positive note, we have also heard about proven solutions, new ideas and strong commitments from within the region. Yes, there is clearly a need for more and longer-term funding models, but there is also further to go to break down organisational silos and to bring

We know it is not just the East that is affected by poor rural connections.

data and evidence together. And more can be done to link transport, land-use and service planning to enhance the case for improvements.

We can take the new ways of travelling being developed and tested in more urban areas and trial their application for rural locations. And we can make sure new policies, plans and funding have a rural lens applied to them. The Sub-national Transport Bodies are a good place to bring partners together to lead strategic thinking across these complex issues.

We know it is not just the East that is affected by poor rural connections, but with 600,000 people in the Transport East region living in 'transport deserts', improving this situation is an important priority for the region.

The findings from this call for evidence support those from the Department of Transport and the work of the Smart Mobility Unit at the University of Hertfordshire, alongside others working in this field.

The report only serves to strengthen previous evidence on these challenges and begins to coalesce around solutions that can help make a real difference to people living in rural areas both in the East and across the UK. We recognise the work that the Department of Transport has done in this area, particularly within the **'Future of Transport: supporting rural transport innovation'** report and believe our work will help progress the government's ambitions to improve rural transport.

I'd like to thank my fellow Commissioners for their thoughtful and expert contributions to this report, the organisations and people who took the time to give their valuable insight and the Transport East and JFG Communications teams for their secretariat support for the call for evidence process.

We will continue to review the progress against the recommendations in this report to ensure it makes a difference.

Commissioners

The Committee is comprised of experts throughout the East, each with knowledge and insight from their respective fields of work. It consists of a Chair and several other Committee members.

Chair

Dr Scott Copsey – Principal Lecturer at the University of Hertfordshire and Smart Mobility Unit Director

Committee members

Candy Richards – Federation of Small Businesses

Caroline Whitney – Community Transport Association

Jack Eagle – Transport Planning Society Eastern region

Nick Khan – East Suffolk Council

Pete Waters – Visit East of England

Rik Martin – Community Action Norfolk

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Summary

Purpose

The purpose of the **Rural Connections: Transport challenges and opportunities for communities in the East** report is to lay out evidence and findings from the Rural Strategy Hub call for evidence regarding the challenges facing transport in the East, a region with a large rural and rural coastal population. This area is covered by Transport East, the leading Sub-national Transport Body (STB) on Rural Mobility.

The formation of the Rural Mobility Strategy Hub, made up of Commissioners with a range of interests and expertise in the region, facilitated wide discussion with stakeholders on the obstacles to transport services that impact social wellbeing, education, and employment opportunities.

Through analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data and oral evidence gathered from respondents and stakeholders, the report draws findings and key recommendations for national government, local government, Transport East and regional partners.

The regional context

- The Transport East region is home to 3.5 million people and 1.7 million jobs. It contributes to vital economic sectors of energy production, life-sciences and freight and logistics, as well as a £727m agriculture economy, with 15% of England's farmed land found in the Eastern region.
- Rural and coastal areas face transport constraints, with 33% of the population living in rural areas and 21% on the coast, this leads to high car dependency for two-thirds of the East's rural residents living in 'transport deserts'[1].
- Limited transport options in rural areas impacts access to employment, essential services, and healthcare. Limited digital connections contribute to a below national average level of residents able to work from home, where remote working and online shopping could reduce need for journeys.
- Though vital to a strong visitor economy, seasonal peaks in tourism, such as bank and school holidays, can place additional strain on local roads, towns, and natural spaces. Many tourism hotspots are hard to reach by public or sustainable transport.

1. 'Transport deserts' refers to communities who lack public transport options for residents to travel for everyday activities without needing to use a car. Source: https://www.cpre.org.uk/news/transport-deserts/

Challenges

Respondents to the call for evidence shared numerous challenges they experience with current rural transport provision.

Current network challenges:

- Potential public transport users face challenges regarding the cost, ease of booking, and frequency of services. Issues with journey planning information and transport infrastructure quality also create a barrier to use of public transport.
- 20% of respondents find public transport cost prohibitive. The bus fare cap has proved popular with 23 respondents citing it as an incentive.
- Simpler ticketing with flexibility across modes, digitalization and contactless payment would further incentivise use of public transport.

Journey planning and travel information:

- 45% of business respondents identified new technology for sustainable modes as important to resolve difficulties users face in accessing accurate journey information.
- Reliable, simple to use apps could provide certainty that would facilitate a switch to sustainable modes but there are concerns regarding cross-boundary functionality and ensuring accessibility for all users.

Quality of transport infrastructure:

- Public transport unreliability is a major concern, particularly in rural locations. The condition of buses, frequency of service, and inconsistent connections to the rail network are perceived as barriers to use.
- Unsuitable and unsafe sustainable transport infrastructure in rural locations is highlighted as hindering the uptake of walking, wheeling and cycling.

Perceptions of the network

- 95% of individuals believe a focus on improving frequency, reliability and services on local bus networks would improve rural mobility.
- Community Transport services are perceived as a valuable service in rural areas, but are often seen as exclusive to older or disabled people and therefore inaccessible to other users.
- Where Demand Responsive Transport exists this is seen positively.

Operators and local authorities

- Funding and financial challenges are identified as the greatest obstacle for transport operators providing rural services, emphasising the need for increased investment from national government.
- Enhanced Partnerships (EPs) are seen as a positive step in strategic collaboration between bus operators and local authorities.
- There are calls for funding for concessionary fares and the fare cap to apply consistently including to Community Transport and DRT services.
- Complexity in the delivery of services to meet multiple needs including school transport and non-emergency transport for health care creates duplication and inefficiencies.
- Layers of government, regulation and stakeholder interests makes innovating to improve rural services challenging.

Outcomes

The evidence received highlights barriers faced by transport users, operational challenges and the economic, environmental, and social outcomes of these. Four main themes are explored: Access to health and essential services, access to employment, access to education and training, and social isolation, well-being, and social mobility. Additionally, it highlights the impact on the visitor economy and the challenges surrounding achieving decarbonisation ambitions.

Access to health and essential services

- 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.

Access to employment:

- 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 with associated costs.

Access to education and training:

- Limited transport options impact young people's education choices and creates social isolation as their participation in student life is hindered.
- Across businesses in the East, there are challenges in accessing training opportunities which contributes to skill shortages. In the visitor economy and hospitality sector this is a particular issue but also for skilled roles in the energy and green economy.
- Applying a rural access lens to a strategic skills plan is crucial to unlocking the region's workforce potential.

Social isolation, well-being, and social mobility:

- 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.

Visitor economy

- The visitor economy in the East faces unique transport challenges, with seasonal peaks affecting rural and coastal communities.
- Coordination between public transport operators, visitor destinations, and local government is vital to address travel behaviours.
- Sustainable transport options are crucial for reducing congestion and emissions during peak travel hours.

Decarbonisation and environment:

- Reliance on private vehicles may hinder the East in meeting net-zero targets by 2050.
- Concerns raised about air quality and links to health and environmental issues in rural areas.

Evidence, monitoring, and evaluation:

- There is a gap in knowledge surrounding successful transport schemes and interventions.
- The Transport East Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence aims to address this gap with academic partnerships, collaboration with other Sub-national Transport Bodies knowledge sharing and evidence collection.

Considering rural needs in policy and planning:

- Central government policies and funding constraints create an obstacle for local authorities when it comes to integrating rural transport needs into their plans.
- Extending devolution settlements with the Department of Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities (DLUHC) and improved investment into local transport plans would go some way to improving provision and outcomes.

Findings

Overall, the findings emphasise the need for a comprehensive, coordinated approach to address rural transport challenges in the East, considering the diverse needs of different communities and sectors.

Community Transport (CT): Stakeholders highlighted the crucial role of CT in filling gaps in the transport network, especially for disadvantaged individuals. Despite its importance, CT is often overlooked in transport planning, and the report suggests integrating it into a multi-modal system.

Land use and development: There is a need for better coordination between land use planning and transport planning, especially in plan making and evaluating new developments. The aim is to minimise car dependent communities by strengthening local services and transport provision within rural communities, to support local trips and improve local economies.

Maintenance priority: Respondents raised concerns about maintenance issues, including road walking and cycling infrastructure, signage, and lighting. Addressing these issues enhances safety, knowledge of active travel routes, and overall attractiveness.

Digital services: The digitalisation of essential services is highlighted as a way to reduce the need for travel. While recognizing the benefits, the report emphasises the importance of addressing digital accessibility challenges and potential reduction on direct social contact.

Evidencing social value in transport decisions: The difficulty in measuring and evidencing the wider social value of transport particularly impacts rural services which are less commercially viable. Frustration was evident from respondents on the lack of joined-up thinking between public service providers when making changes to the location of health and other essential services, with the cost and challenge of accessing new locations placed on individuals.

The report recommends conducting transport access impact assessments when public and transport services are changed to understand the broader impacts on the network, economy, environment, and other essential services. It also emphasises how government needs to evolve business case appraisals to better capture wider social, economic, and environmental factors in decision-making.

Car sharing: Initiatives like car clubs and lift sharing are considered underutilised and can contribute to decarbonising journeys. The report suggests that businesses need to understand the long-term environmental and economic value attached to sustainable transport.

Demand Responsive Transport (DRT): DRT schemes, such as 'Flexibus' and 'DigiGo' in the East, are highlighted as flexible options for those in rural areas. The report emphasises the importance of simplifying, and potentially unifying booking systems to enhance the user experience.

Tourism and sustainable transport: Reducing the impact of tourism associated travel is an important goal for the East's visitor economy. The report suggests increased promotion of trips accessible by green modes and providing the necessary information for confident public transport or active travel use.

Active travel: Initiatives promoting cycling, walking, wheeling and e-bikes are seen as effective for sustainable transport. The report advocates for consistent e-bike provision and learning from trials in other areas.

EV charging infrastructure: The report acknowledges the role of electric vehicles (EVs) in a sustainable rural transport network. It calls for increased number of charge points, improved grid capacity, and strategic planning to support the uptake of EVs.

Reducing staff travel: The report explores accommodation for staff in remote areas and advocates for establishing best practices. It also suggests staff minibuses as an efficient near door-to-door travel solution, increasing use of these assets by multiple businesses through joint travel planning.

Gaps in evidence: While comprehensive evidence was gathered, the report acknowledges that not all sectors' views were captured and encourages ongoing engagement to improve understanding and add value to organisations working on rural connections in the East.

Recommendations

The call for evidence 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 will provide the mechanism for identifying the practical next steps for these recommendations and for monitoring progress.

Recommendations for central government

1. Focus on building long-term capacity and capability within local authorities to support innovation in rural transport

2. Expand the Local Integrated Transport Settlements to cover all local transport authorities in England

3. Work with Sub-national Transport Bodies to develop a social value module for transport business case appraisals including monitoring and evaluation, to better deliver government priority outcomes from transport investment

4. Establish a rural regulatory 'sandbox' area to explore how different forms of transport could be used more effectively, if the regulatory environment could be flexed

5. Work with academia and regional partners to focus future research into rural transport on evidence gaps including young people, disabled people, freight and rural businesses

6. Continue with £2 fare cap beyond 2024 and ensure concessionary fares are applied and funded consistently across all bus operators, Community Transport and DRT services, including the fare cap

7. Work with the Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence to fund, deliver and evaluate rural pilots that address current research gaps potentially through a specifically rural 'Future Transport Zone' or innovation pilot

8. Increased and longer-term funding for the Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence, to maximise its impact and create a resource all English rural authorities can use to share good practice and drive efficiencies

Recommendations for local government

9. Ensure flexible bus services (including Community Transport & DRT) are considered as an integral part of transport planning at national, regional and local levels

10. Better join up between transport & land use planning for rural areas in all levels of government, to increase viability of rural services and maximise opportunities for sustainable journeys

11. Prioritise maintenance and improvement of rural public transport, walking, wheeling and cycling infrastructure within places and to key destinations, to reduce car dependency for short trips

12. Undertake transport access impact assessments to include social, environmental and longer-term economic factors when public service locations, or transport service provisions are changed to ensure rural residents are not further negatively affected

13. Consider how local financial levers could be used to support increased transport provision, for example parking revenues, developer funds, visitor levies, business rate supplements

14. Align maintenance, incident planning and climate resilience planning to reduce transport impacts of weather events on isolated communities

15. Access to jobs: Local authorities and Enhanced Partnerships to foster increased collaboration between employers, operators, education providers and policy makers, especially in rural areas

16. Access to education and training: As skills responsibility returns to local authorities, embed rural needs in new and existing plans, programmes and funding opportunities, considering transport access

Recommendations for Transport East and partners

17. Transport East's Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence to break down barriers across the public sector to integrate rural access needs into decision making

18. Transport East to bid for a multidisciplinary area pilot: Joining data or trialling new mobility hubs to provide evidence and a model for wider application

19. Transport East to build on the work from Midlands Connect and Transport for the West Midlands on a model for integrated ticketing in the East, and explore the value of regional integration of digital customer information improve cross-boundary and multiple operator journeys

20. STB Rural Mobility group to work with rural experts to strengthen the evidence for the value of rural services and strategic case for investment

21. STB Rural Mobility group to develop 'rural pilot guidance' to share good practice, speed roll-out, improve evidence and drive efficiencies

22. Transport East, local government and operators to consider weekend, evening and seasonal travel demand impacts within analysis, planning and delivery

23. Transport East to work with Enhanced Partnerships, transport operators and representative groups to advocate for investment addressing barriers to public transport for seen and unseen disabilities

24. Transport East to explore opportunities to bring a partnership together under a 'Commute Zero' umbrella to include rural locations

25. Visitor bodies to work with destinations to increase the promotion and incentivisation of public and active transport. Fostering better collaboration between public transport operators & visitor destinations to increase sustainable tourism destinations

26. Access to health: Establish mechanisms for greater engagement between health and transport service providers to enhance evidence, planning, operations and outcomes Aligning with national policy direction

Aligning with national policy direction

In the final stages of our evidence collection, the Department for Transport published the **'Future of Transport: supporting rural transport innovation'** document.

It follows a 2020 call for evidence run by the DfT to understand the transport needs of rural areas. Several issues were raised in this call for evidence including:

- poor access to services in rural areas
- a lack of genuine choice for completing journeys
- heightened loneliness and isolation
- commercial challenges for operators due to long distances and sparse populations

Our work has found some similar challenges, outcomes and solutions. The recommendations within this report align clearly with the principles for future rural mobility set out by the DfT and if adopted will make progress against the government's ambitions to improve rural transport.

DfT principles for future rural mobility	Recommendations
1. New modes of transport must be safe and secure by design	1 | 5 | 10 | 23 | 26
2. Innovation in transport should consider the needs of rural transport users and must be available and accessible to all parts of the UK and all segments of society	1 | 2 | 3 | 8 | 12 | 17 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 26
3. Walking, wheeling, cycling and micromobility must be enabled as the best options for the short rural journeys	3 | 4 | 5 | 7 | 8 | 11 | 12 | 25
4. Affordable and accessible public transport and shared mobility must be fundamental to an efficient rural transport system	6 | 13 | 19 | 22
5. New transport modes and services should support a rapid transition to zero emissions and be adapted to climate change	1 | 7 | 8 | 14 | 24 | 25
6. Innovation should improve road efficiency and reduce congestion by promoting shared mobility, improving user choice and consolidating freight	7 | 10 | 13 | 22 | 25
7. The marketplace for mobility must be open to stimulate innovation and give the best deal to users, working alongside local authorities to complement existing services	1 | 4 | 10 | 13 | 18
8. New transport services must be designed to operate as part of an integrated system that combines public and private modes with community-led schemes for transport users	1 | 2 | 9 | 10 | 12 | 13 | 15 16 | 20 | 22 | 26
9. Data from new transport services must be shared where appropriate to improve both choice and the operation of the transport system	4 | 7 | 18 | 19 | 21

Methodology

Aims and objectives

Transport East established a Regional Strategy Hub as a way of taking an independent view of complex transport issues. As one of the most rural regions of England and as the hosts of the Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence, it was decided the first inquiry should be focused on this area.

The project's objectives were to explore the challenges and opportunities within rural transport, resulting in a report and set of recommendations developed from the evidence and in discussion with different stakeholders in the region.

Approach

A Committee of expert stakeholders (Commissioners) was established, selected due to their background and expertise, each specialising in a different sector. These sectors included academia, local government, tourism, business, community transport, transport planning and the third sector. The Committee was chaired by Dr Scott Copsey and supported by a Secretariat made up of Transport East and JFG Communications. The Commissioners and Secretariat jointly comprised the 'Regional Strategy Hub'.

The Commissioners wanted to hear from the broadest possible range of stakeholders, so a 'call for evidence' approach was established to gather evidence from individuals, businesses, organisations and representative bodies. This process included both written and oral evidence. This evidence was then collated into this report and informed the recommendations within.

Data collection

The call for evidence received 108 responses from 71 individuals, 11 businesses and 26 organisations via an online survey and 33 participants in oral evidence sessions.

The online survey was distributed to key stakeholder contacts and shared via their networks, promoted on social media, included in trade publications and distributed among our Commissioner's networks. Though the survey was primarily accessed online, offline versions were made available to support responses from stakeholders who were unable to complete online, to enable all who wished to respond.

Demographic and establishing questions were included with tick box responses for quantitative data alongside five free text questions for qualitative evidence. The survey also included an option to upload supporting data as files.

The questions were drafted to distinguish between the challenges and potential solutions to these challenges. They focused on private transport connections (cars, walking, cycling) and public transport connections (bus, rail, community transport) separately. A question was included asking respondents to evaluate how important certain areas of rural transport were to improve mobility (funding, role of stakeholders, investing in technology). This allowed for some quantitative analysis.

The written call for evidence was published on 16 June 2023 and closed 19 July 2023. Other responses in the form of reports, blogs and briefs were also accepted.

In addition to the written call for evidence, the Committee conducted four oral evidence sessions divided thematically to expand on the written evidence received and to extend the range of views received. Two sessions were focused on business and tourism, one on community transport, charity and education and one on local authorities and operators.

Each session was covered by an online whiteboard with one page per question, allowing contributing attendees to add comments during the session. These were kept open following the sessions for further comment.

Three sessions were conducted virtually. These were recorded and transcribed to aid accurate documentation and analysis by the secretariat, which attendees were made aware of.

Each group of contributors was asked a series of questions derived from the survey, intending to delve deeper into issues raised through the written call for evidence. The sessions focussed on anecdotal evidence and experience of the attendees and the sectors they represented. Areas covered included how public and private transport provision affected their sector or organisation, their experience of access to customers and employees, an opportunity to share schemes and innovation in their areas and their priorities for national and local policy.

Analysis

The survey responses resulted in quantitative data and qualitative reporting. Free text responses were analysed via word cloud and tagging. The categorising of comments by key points raised allowed high-level themes to be drawn out from recurring tags and points raised multiple times by respondents. Evidence highlighting successful schemes or interesting case studies was also recorded.

The results from the quantitative question were split into separate types of stakeholders, individuals, businesses and organisations.

The oral evidence was reviewed following each session, and against the survey response data to identify areas of alignment and divergence. Comments were identified relating to key points to strengthen the reporting and to inform the recommendations.

Once all the evidence had been properly analysed and scrutinised the Commissioners began drafting the report.

Reflections on the approach

The approach taken to the call for evidence was focused on stakeholder and organisational representatives. While a good response was received from individuals, the structure of the questions and response mechanism was not specifically designed for the public. Transport East also covers a large region which can be difficult to reach all communities within. We accept this approach means the data gathered is not comprehensive or demographically representative. This does not undermine the value of evidence but is a reminder that further work is required to further understand the full picture of rural transport and mobility.

We monitored the responses as the written call for evidence was live and worked to encourage responses from all areas of the region, through additional communication. The Commissioners targeted stakeholders operating in locations with low feedback, urging them to share with local networks.

We were particularly aware that respondents were on average older than the general population and the population in the region. To ensure representation of some of the issues affected by younger generations, stakeholders representing young people and further education institutions were included in one of the four oral evidence sessions.

Findings: Rural mobility challenges, outcomes and solutions

The call for evidence online survey received 108 responses from 71 individuals, 11 businesses and 26 organisations. Of the 71 individuals comfortable with disclosing the information, 45 were women and 20 were men. 15 respondents identified as disabled or having a long-term health condition that impacts their ability to get around. Our respondents were older than the general population with 25% aged between 65-74 and 4% below 34.

The oral evidence sessions were attended by 33 participants.

The themes and issues analysed in this section are from the written call for evidence responses and in-person evidence sessions. The section is split into:

- The challenges faced by users of rural transport in the East
- The social, economic and environmental impacts of those challenges, and
- Suggested potential solutions

Quotes from the written evidence are included throughout

Future of Transport: Supporting rural transport innovation

In the final stages of our evidence collection, the Department for Transport (DfT) published the **'Future of Transport: supporting rural transport innovation'** document[2]. It follows a 2020 call for evidence run by the DfT to understand the transport needs of rural areas[3]. Several issues were raised, in this call for evidence including:

- poor access to services in rural areas
- a lack of genuine choice for completing journeys
- heightened loneliness and isolation
- commercial challenges for operators due to long distances and sparse populations

Our work has found some similar challenges, outcomes and solutions. In other places, our report supplements and adds to the DfT's findings.

2 Future of Transport: Supporting Rural Transport Innovation. Department for Transport, 2023
3 Future of Transport: Rural Strategy – Call for Evidence. Department for Transport, 2020

Regional context

The Transport East region makes a significant, unique contribution to the UK. It is home to 3.5 million people and 1.7 million jobs. Alongside crucial economic sectors of energy production, life-sciences and freight and logistics, sits a £727m agriculture economy with 15% of England's farmed land in the Eastern region.

Transport constraints are a significant challenge for rural and coastal areas. Over 33% of the population within the region live in rural areas and 21% live on the coast, both significantly higher than the national average. Car dependency is particularly high in these areas, with two-thirds of rural communities in the region living in 'transport deserts'.[4]

The proportion of the rural population who can access employment and services by walking, cycling, wheeling or public transport is lower than the rural average for England. A disproportionately high number of people in these areas are over 65 years, creating challenges around isolation and access to healthcare for those who do not have easy access to a vehicle.

Limited transport connections in rural areas are compounded by limited digital connections. Only a small proportion of rural areas currently have access to ultrafast broadband, which contributes to the levels of people who can work remotely – just 33% of the region's residents can work from home, compared to 46% nationally. As well as hindering people's access to the jobs market, this also restricts the potential for bringing services and goods to them.

An additional transport challenge faced by many of our rural and coastal areas is the impact of seasonal peaks in demand through the region's role in domestic tourism. Many tourism hot-spots are difficult to access by public transport, so the pressure on local roads, centres and natural spaces from visitors in cars is notable, especially during Bank and school holidays. Managing this demand while maintaining the strong visitor economy requires creative solutions.

4 'Transport deserts' refers to communities who lack public transport options for residents to travel for everyday activities without needing to use a car. Source: https://www.cpre.org.uk/news/transport-deserts/

Challenges

The current transport network for users

Several notable challenges faced by users of the current transport network were raised consistently throughout the evidence. Key issues included:

- Cost of transport and ease of booking and paying for journeys
- Frequency, reliability and journeys times of public transport
- Ease of access to journey planning information both before setting off and on route
- Quality of transport infrastructure

Costs and service provision of public transport

20% of respondents (23 respondents) referred to public transport being cost prohibitive. Of these respondents, 6 welcomed the bus fare cap as an incentive to travel by bus and increased patronage as a result.

How much it costs users to travel, and how they pay, featured heavily in responses to our survey. Respondents thought fares were too expensive, especially for buses (pre-fare cap), and taxis, an issue that has been compounded by the rising costs of other essentials.

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.

Responses on general fare levels stood in contrast to the £2 fare cap which was widely praised.

Given rural bus journeys are longer, the fares are usually higher for single journeys, so the £2 fare cap has had a greater benefit to rural communities served. However, the fact not all bus service operators had adopted the £2 fare cap, and not all Demand Responsive Travel services are included meant a disparity in accessing the reduced fares across the region.

High fares were seen to especially affect younger people, particularly those trying to access post-16 education, seasonal employment and training. Several respondents suggested free bus and rail travel until aged 18 or 21 as a policy solution. Some also suggested extending the bus fare cap to rail. The overarching premise behind most suggestions was that ticketing could be cheaper and simpler. Respondents suggested the digitalisation of ticketing and the ability to choose contactless payment. Respondents also favoured multi-modal ticketing with a degree of flexibility.

"

"The lack of affordable travel options is directly contributing to socio and economic challenges and poor outcomes for residents and the wider community."

Local Transport Authority

Recommendations

6 | 13 | 19

Journey planning and travel information

45% of respondents from the business sector and 42% from organisations rated focusing on new technology, to enable transition to sustainable modes, as important.

Respondents reported finding it difficult to access the correct information while planning for a journey and mid-way through the journey. Many suggested a user-friendly app to assist with planning and we are aware several local transport authorities within the East and larger operators provide, or are developing, such apps. A reliable app provides certainty to commit to sustainable public transport options over private cars where cancellations and delays aren't an issue, however there are uncertainties about how these local apps work for journeys that cross local authority boundaries meaning they do not fully reflect or support the way people travel. They also require reliable mobile connections, which in rural areas can also be problematic.

Respondents highlighted accessibility concerns that must be considered with an online booking platform. The introduction of apps needs to be accompanied by a drive to help all users use the platform. Respondents also correctly recognised that some users will not use apps or are not able to use them, and information needs to be made available in different formats.

Accurate timetables, public information points, SMS and phone calls can act as the information point for users who are not digitally minded or may have accessibility concerns which prohibit them from using apps and digital platforms.

Respondents found this information hard to find when travelling, and if they could it was reported as often being inaccurate. Journey information is spread across multiple sources, for example, a website, app and information point, leading to confusion and creating a further barrier. The types of information which respondents thought would be useful included expected times (arrival/destination), delays, cancellations, alternate routes, connecting journeys, capacity and price.

Regarding Community Transport and Demand Responsive Transport, respondents found booking services a challenge. Some services are only possible to access over the phone, which reduces flexibility and can create a barrier for some users. Several respondents recommended digitalising services, but this has its complications, especially with older and disabled users. The nature of how these services operate means that users can only book so far in advance.

Respondents highlighted that this meant they were not as useful for certain types of trips. For example, if you have a hospital appointment or exam 6 weeks away, relying on the possibility of booking these types of services does not give confidence that you will be able to make that journey on time. Respondents wanted a simple booking process, that allowed the ability to plan, while still offering flexibility to amend plans when necessary.

Recommendations

4 | 18 | 19

Quality of transport infrastructure

30 comments referred to sustainable transport infrastructure, especially active travel, being unsuitable and unsafe, creating a negative perception and discouraging mode shift.

Regarding active travel, respondents found their desired routes were not available, for example, a road without a cycle lane or path. Within rural areas, this can be as minimal as a lack of footpath on one-side of the road for all residences or amenities in a village, or poorly maintained routes with overgrown hedges and grass verges or poorly maintained lighting. This creates routes that are available but are not safe or secure enough to attract people out of their cars.

For public transport, respondents found unreliability the biggest issue. The location and condition of bus stops and standard of the bus themselves, the number of buses per hour and the likelihood of delays and cancellations all contributed to a doubtfulness that buses could not guarantee individuals' travel needs. For rail, the major concern surrounded the location of stations which in rural areas can be a mile or more 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.

Recommendations

2 | 11 | 14 | 20

Perceptions of the network

62 comments were received from individuals referencing reduced or no service, poor connectivity between bus and train or the timing of services being prohibitive. 35 comments from organisations noted similar issues of timing and limited services.

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.

National and local government, alongside industry stakeholders must rebuild this image so users do not automatically think of a failing service. Improvements to services must be coupled with sustained efforts to improve the public perception of services and work to shift travel behaviour.

Negative perceptions were most apparent with buses. Having seen several years of bus service withdrawals, particularly 'uncommercial' rural services, it's unsurprising this perception is embedded. 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.

There was a prevailing sense among respondents that community transport (CT) services were exclusively for older or disabled people. Some people, particularly younger people, felt these services were not meant for them so would discount them as a realistic choice. Altering the perception of CT to a viable mode for all eligible users would prove beneficial for operators and potentially provide additional income.

Changing travel behaviours is difficult and will require a coordinated effort from multiple stakeholders across government and industry. There are clear cases of success in the region which can be emulated, particularly some of the new Demand Responsive Transport services. These are explored later in the report when analysing solutions.

Popular visitor destinations can actively promote and incentivise sustainable journeys. Respondents expressed a clear interest in making sustainable journeys to these types of destinations but lacked options or incentives. There is an opportunity here for visitor destinations to offer loyalty reward schemes and other initiatives to encourage greener options. For example, Norfolk has become the first ‘Good Journey’ county, teaming up with the organisation that promotes sustainable travel to visitor destinations through discounts and offers with Travel Norfolk highlighting locations that have signed up through their travel planner.

Recommendations

2 | 12 | 20 | 22 | 25

"Levels of consciousness need to be heightened to encourage people to use public transport."

Local Transport Authority

"Bus services running more frequently and on evenings and weekends would make them a viable alternative to the private car."

Local Transport user

Operators and Local Authorities

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 as government subsidy for bus services has reduced.

For example, these maps of Suffolk bus services show the change in provision between 1998 and 2023. The 2023 map shows large rural areas of the county not served by any buses and others only served by three or fewer bus services per week.

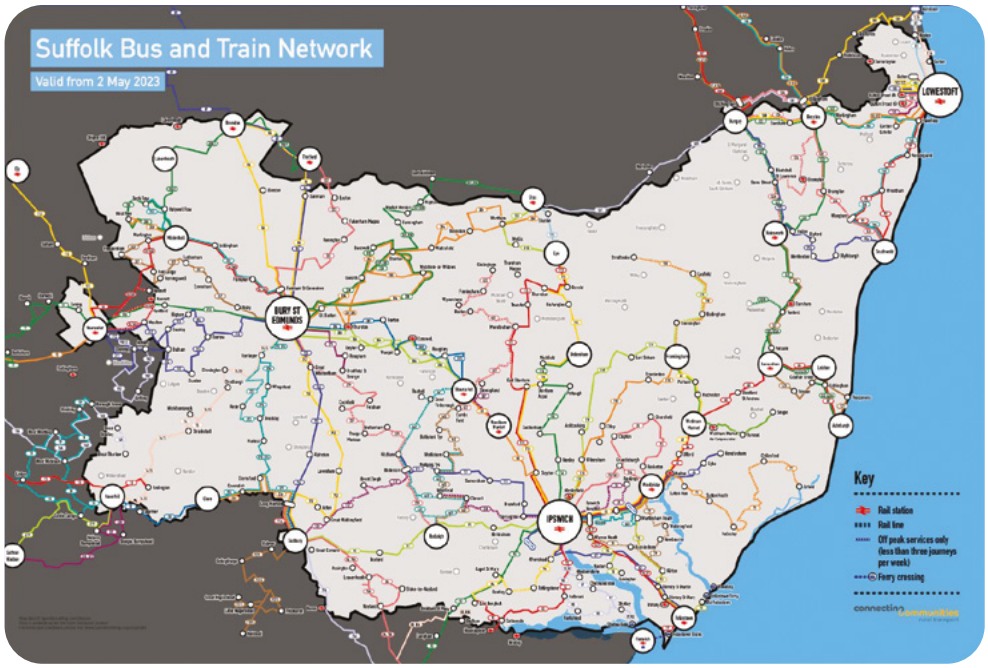

Fig 1. Suffolk bus and train network map. Suffolk on board, Suffolk County Council, 2023

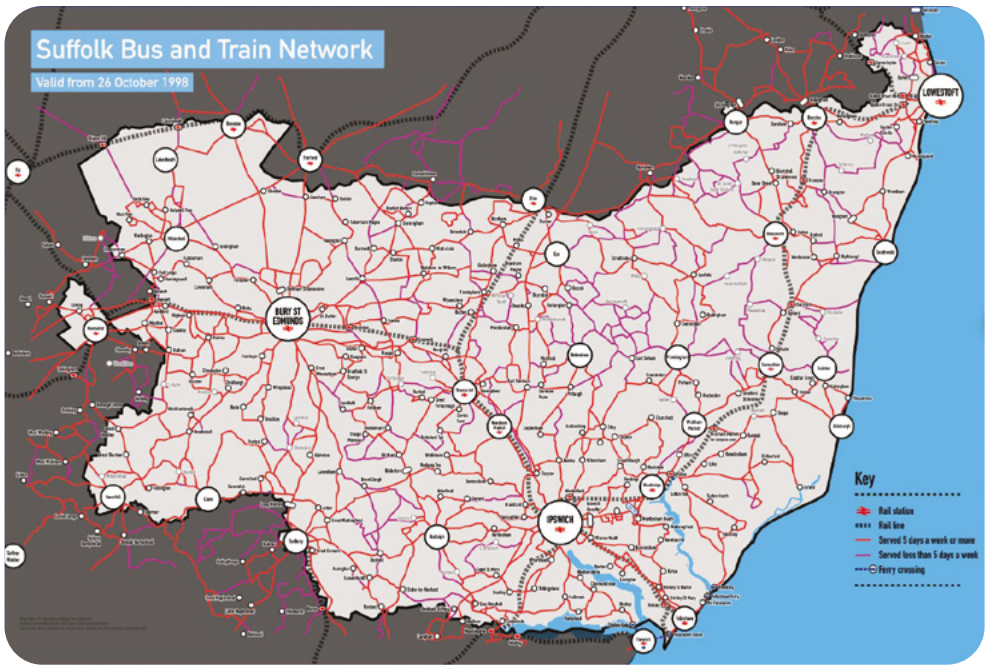

Fig 2. Suffolk bus and train network map. Suffolk on board, Suffolk County Council, 1998

Despite the significant social value in the provision of public transport services beyond the financial considerations, operators and local authorities felt this was often not enough to guarantee the survival of services. Of the stakeholders who responded to the call for evidence and classed themselves as organisations, 100% believed increasing the investment from national government was either highly important or important.

A further point from local authorities was around the requirement to part fund extensions to the national concessionary fare scheme for older people. While there was recognition of the benefits of providing concessionary fares for older people, there was a concern that the requirement to subsidise the funding for travel beyond the minimum hours covered by the scheme undermined local transport authority's ability to maintain and improve bus services or provide concessionary fares for other groups of people. There was a call for government to fully fund the concessionary fare scheme to operate 24 hours a day and be enhanced to cover CT services, to reduce pressure on local authority budgets.

Respondents pointed out the need for concessionary fares to consistently apply to CT and DRT. The £2 bus fare cap was praised by numerous respondents, and operators indicated that it has increased ridership. The £2 bus fare cap should be funded to apply consistently across CT and DRT services. Reducing fares is consistently proven to increase ridership and lessen the burden of rising costs for users. In the case of CT, this means lessening the burden for some of the most disadvantaged people in the region. Initiatives have been successfully trialled by the Welsh Government, and Transport Scotland has noted a range of benefits to extending concessions to community bus operations including tackling social exclusion and generating a further income source for crucial CT services. The East has an opportunity to explore the full impacts of concessionary fares on rural CT services.

Funding for local authorities to support essential bus routes and improve services has been spread unevenly across the country in recent years. 64 councils received notable bus service improvement plan (BSIP) funding in the first allocation, leaving many Local Transport Authorities without the guarantee of central Government investment despite spending significant resources creating a BSIP. While the BSIP+ funding provided the unfunded authorities with some additional money, the amounts were far below the original BSIP submissions and are unlikely to transform local provision.

The way funding structures are set up, primarily designed around a competitive bidding process, favours certain authorities over others, with rural areas often missing out. Funding should be distributed fairly, and recognise the additional costs associated with rural services, to give Local Transport Authorities and the operators they work with through Enhanced Partnerships, the long-term confidence to invest in bus services.

Lack of capacity and capability within local government, because of long-term underfunding, has led to Local Transport Authorities (LTAs) focusing heavily on the day-to-day provision of services. There is a clear desire across local authorities to serve communities as well as possible. However, the ability to think strategically and plan longer term, was secondary to keeping services running.

The same problem applies to collaborating across county borders and between stakeholders. On top of the structural barriers stopping this type of coordination, many felt the capacity to collaborate was minimal. This capacity constraint, along with differences in funding provision has made it difficult for local authorities to allocate time and resources to exploring more innovative or more cost-effective ways of providing services.

Enhanced Partnerships (EP's) are beginning make a difference in alleviating some of these capacity constraints, sharing resources between LTA's and local bus operators to improve services. An EP allows LTAs to think strategically combining the knowledge and skills on both the local government and operator side. This helps LTA's to consider how bus provision can support some of its wider policy goals such as economic growth, public health and decarbonisation. EPs also reduce some of the financial risk operators take when offering services which may not be commercially viable, meaning certain routes which provide value outside of the purely commercial sense are less likely to be withdrawn. Where EPs have been established in the East, they are providing a useful mechanism for coordinating operations and identifying joint areas for improvement, however it is to be noted not all operators are part of an EP and some communities may see slower improvements.

A further issue raised is the constrained regulatory environment surrounding bus, DRT and CT provision, including the competition legislation in the 1985 Transport Act. This makes it hard for Enhanced Partnerships to shift to more flexible and potentially more commercial operational models. An additional barrier is the central government funding approaches to school transport and non-emergency patient transport in the health sector. A more holistic approach and increased regulatory flexibility would encourage innovation leading to better value for money.

Recommendations

1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 | 12 | 13 20 | 22 | 25

Barriers in a journey

Initial decision

- Do I feel confident enough to travel by myself? — **Under 25**
- What time do I need to be there? I am I going to my usual workplace? Do I need to complete another task while I am out i.e. school run/ shopping/ errand? — **Commuter**
- Where do I want to go? What are the other options? — **Tourist**
- Do I feel mentally and physically capable of travelling? — **65+**

Planning

- Where can I find information? What are my options? — **Under 25**
- What are my options? Will I get there on time? — **Commuter**
- How easy is it to get to? Will it be an enjoyable journey? Is it easy to take luggage? How do I get back? — **Tourist**
- Where can I find information? What are my options? Is all of my journey accessible? — **65+**

Paying

- Is the mode of travel too expensive? Do I need cash? — **Under 25**
- Is it convenient for me to pay? How much will it cost? — **Commuter**
- How do I pay? How much does it cost? Is there a multi-trip ticket/ family ticket? — **Tourist**
- Are there concessionary fares? Can I pay by cash? — **65+**

Departure

- Will it be late? Who do I need to tell if I am late? — **Under 25**
- Will it be late? Who do I need to inform? Will I look unreliable? — **Commuter**
- Where do I go? What happens if I miss it? — **Tourist**
- Is there somewhere to sit when waiting? How do I know when it is coming? What happens if it is late? — **65+**

Travelling

- Do I feel safe? Do I need to change? What if there is a problem/ delay? Can I get a data connection on route? — **Under 25**
- Do I need to change? What are my alternatives if there is a problem? Can I get a data connection on route? — **Commuter**
- Do I need to change? What are my alternatives if there is a problem? Can I get a data connection on route? — **Tourist**
- Do I feel safe? Do I need to change? What are my alternatives if there is a problem? Are the alternatives accessible? — **65+**

The last mile

- Do I feel safe? How can I get there? — **Under 25**
- What is my route? How long will it take? — **Commuter**
- What is my route? How long will it take? Is it easy to move luggage? — **Tourist**
- How can I get there? How long will it take? Will there be places to rest on the way? — **65+**

Outcomes

The transport user and operational challenges highlighted in the section above have a range of economic, environmental and social outcomes, as articulated by responses to the call for evidence. Understanding the impacts of the current transport network is crucial to building a set of targeted recommendations which are realistic and actionable. The outcomes are explored and analysed thematically in the following section.

Access to health and other essential services

14 comments were received from individuals relating to difficulty in accessing medical appointments or having mobility challenges.

Many people living in rural areas needing regular access to healthcare and other essential services have mobility challenges or other health conditions that make accessing public transport more difficult. These people are also more likely to need regular healthcare appointments. The mobility challenges meant respondents felt they had few realistic travel choices. Appointments are often time sensitive, so confidence in being able to make the journey reliably is crucial. Generally, respondents felt travelling by car was the best way to achieve this confidence. Where this was not possible personally people often turned to taxis, family and friends to provide travel.

Community Transport (CT) was consistently highlighted as a mode well prepared to service those travelling for healthcare and other essential services. CT services provide door-to-door support for users who are unable to use other forms of transport. It often acts as the only means for people to access healthcare, education, employment and leisure activities. The service allows vulnerable and isolated people to socialise and create meaningful relationships with others using the service, tackling loneliness. The relative flexibility of most CT services and the deep understanding of customer's needs means users have the freedom to travel with confidence, guaranteeing a level of independence which the rest of the transport network fails to assure. In many cases, CT fills the gaps in the public transport network, providing services where other operators can no longer run.

Community Transport is generally provided by localised charities. There are benefits to this model in that they have detailed knowledge of their localities, customers needs, local stakeholders and preferred destinations. However, funding can be unstable, operators are constrained by specific regulations and rely on volunteers – many of whom are older people themselves.

It is not just older people or those with life-long conditions in rural areas who are impacted by challenges accessing health and other care services. Anyone with a mobility restricting condition can be impacted by reduced travel options, which can also slow recovery times.

There are clear social and economic costs related to this poor access. There are direct costs to the health service and other public service providers of missed appointments, both in terms of inefficiencies but also delayed treatment requiring more costly interventions. Then there are the wider social impacts related to social isolation, greater risk of health issues, reduced educational attendance, increasing mental health challenges and a worsening of quality of life. There are also economic costs such as decreased productivity. Poor access also increases economic inequality which intersects with other inequalities.

Several respondents highlighted the poor coordination between the national government, local government, transport operators including community transport and health service providers. There was a view that this increased overall costs of providing transport for health and other care appointments and if a more systematic approach could be taken would be more cost effective and provide a better service for users.

"There is an extremely high demand for transport to and from hospital and medical appointments which we cannot meet. We collect data on the number of people we turn down. Working collaboratively with other charities, taxis, hospital transport services and medical services might help us all work more efficiently. It's a big ask but finding a way to join up data about the availability of all transport services could make much better use of everyone's resources. We are often frustrated by the fact that hospital appointments are cancelled late, meaning that some people no longer need us, but the notice is too short to help anyone else."

Community Transport provider

Coordination between stakeholders is crucial and could include sharing data or trialling schemes to join provision up more effectively. For successful collaboration, there needs to be a mutual understanding of the regulatory and legislative barriers which stop stakeholders from working together. Transport East and other STBs are well placed to analyse these barriers, convening regional stakeholders and having the capacity to think strategically to identify potential solutions.

There is an opportunity for Transport East to explore this at a regional level or trial something more locally with the potential for rolling out further through the other STBs.

Recommendations

3 | 6 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 12 | 17 | 18 | 21 | 26

Access to employment

9 comments from the business and organisation respondents referenced lack of transport options as a barrier to attracting employees and opportunities for young people.

How people access employment is dependent on the transport options available to them. Employees and employers who supplied evidence stressed the importance of viable transport options, for both recruitment of new staff and the retention of current. This included volunteers as well as paid staff and seasonal employees. Employees had two main issues. If the job was too far away, they would discount it altogether while looking for work. Or they may have believed the commute to be manageable or affordable, only to find it too demanding, costly or have safety concerns, particularly for hospitality or shift work requiring travel at night. All concerns restricted the potential pool of employees available to employers.

"Poor public transport connections in Norfolk support car dependency and ultimately limit the staff that we can attract into the organisation. Our staff work hybrid with our office based in Easton. There are limited Public Transport options to the office base, particularly out of term time."

Small business owner

As with access to healthcare, there are economic, social and environmental costs to restricted access to employment. The socio-economic costs of restricted access include unemployment, reduced economic growth, outmigration of skilled people, social isolation, reduced life chances and increased inequality.

There are also business costs associated with these challenges, costs of recruiting and training staff only for them to leave, gaps in staffing reducing productivity and restricting growth opportunities, and costs of directly having to provide transport for staff. Additionally, the Treasury will receive less tax revenue from both income tax and business taxes. There are also environmental costs are associated with employees adopting cars as the primary mode of travel to and from work as opposed to more sustainable options.

Certain large employers who gave evidence are deploying a range of initiatives to overcome these impacts. Center Parcs supports all employees to commute sustainably. They offer EV charging points for staff working in the head office, and encourage lift shares where possible. For housekeeping staff, Center Parcs provides free minibuses on certain days of the week, reducing congestion and emissions and crucially making

the commute cheaper and simpler for employees. Center Parcs also incentivises active travel, with safe cycle storage, shower and changing facilities on, and an employee discount on bikes and accessories.

There are rural employment hubs in the region particularly rural business parks or logistics centres, but in most cases no strategy in place to transport larger numbers of employees. Greater collaboration is needed between employers, operators and policy makers to understand travel patterns and explore opportunities to accommodate these patterns more sustainably. This will likely involve sharing appropriate levels of anonymised data. It will also need some form of facilitating body as it is unlikely small businesses with commercial pressures will have the means and capacity to collaborate on transport solutions. This role could be supported initially by STBs working in partnership with local authority officers involved in workplace travel planning.

Recommendations

3 | 5 | 6 | 9 | 10 | 12 | 15 | 24

Access to education and training

14 comments referred to improved public transport increasing opportunities for young people.

We received little direct evidence from younger people, but respondents who had contact with those in education mentioned mobility challenges limiting choice for further education. We also included representatives from further and higher education providers in the oral evidence sessions.

The lack of viable transport options or cost associated with travel appears a significant factor in whether a person would attend a certain education facility. As with employment access, there are two separate issues at play. Discounting a place of education due to limited travel options, which has an impact on available study options, or attempting to travel and finding out it is too difficult.

Also it is not easy to change educational establishments, so a difficult journey is likely to negatively affect a student's education without leaving much room for recourse. Additionally, when public transport is available, limited services mean that rural students are less able to participate fully in student life, including clubs, societies and social events.

Mobility challenges can be exacerbated for young people for various reasons. Lower incomes, less access to a private vehicle, costs associated with learning to drive, greater costs in vehicle insurance and financing, greater concerns about personal safety, and a lack of confidence when travelling all hamper the ability of young people to travel freely and easily. Active travel specifically was a mode which several respondents criticised for being unsafe for both younger and older generations. Reduced options for public transport curtail decisions on where to study or force students into cars.

Similar challenges apply to training opportunities and upskilling the workforce. These issues were raised by several business responses, especially those in the visitor economy and hospitality sector. Restricted access to opportunities increases regional skill shortages as employees have difficulties travelling to training sites, and trainees cannot travel to places of employment.

As the responsibility for the skills agenda returns to Local Authorities, applying a rural transport access lens will be important when considering the skills landscape and looking at improvements. An understanding of the mobility, geographic and digital challenges that are unique to the East will be crucial to creating long-term solutions. A locally responsive strategic skills plan including a rural access lens will unlock the full potential of the region's workforce.

"Young students attending colleges need public transport. Their choice of course may be affected by lack of transport."

Local transport user

Recommendations

3 | 5 | 6 | 9 | 10
12 | 16 | 24

Social isolation, well-being and social mobility

36 comments raised concerns regarding isolation, well-being and mental health in rural communities with limited or no public transport services, and stated these would be improved by better connections and more options.

An efficient integrated transport system offers people the freedom to travel and independently participate in society, which in turn has positive effects on mental health and social mobility. The opposite is true for a system that offers little user choice. For example, the inability to travel to see friends and family or to leisurely activities has been shown to have impacts on social isolation and as a result mental health and well-being[5].

Respondents noted isolation and social mobility impacts were worse for the younger and older generations. For young people, insufficient transport options can negatively affect their ability to make friends, socialise, expand decision-making capabilities, become more independent, and develop meaningful relationships. For older generations, poor travel choices could affect their ability to see other people, increasing loneliness – a key driver of poor mental health.

One contributor to the oral evidence sessions referenced a new community transport user who until they managed to access the service, had not left their home for four years.

Evidence from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) found that the rural farming community has lower average mental well-being than the overall UK population[6]. They concluded rural mental health was not sufficiently represented in mental health policy.

Respondents also highlighted the greater impacts of social isolation on disabled people. If rural transport infrastructure does not address accessibility concerns, the challenges will always have greater impacts on disabled users who already face daily barriers.

Economically, increased isolation means reduced social mobility and increased state dependence. Good transport connections are a vehicle for economic mobility, connecting people to places, jobs and education[7]. Respondents highlighted the connection between social mobility and mental health, noting that improving your economic situation can improve your mental health. The DEFRA report had similar findings, observing a clear relationship between mental health and business health[8]. Tackling rural mobility challenges in the East will improve both.

5 https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2214140515002224
6 https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/39991/documents/195139/default/
7 https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0966692306000512
8 https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/39991/documents/195139/default/

"A client, I support, has mobility issues, she is also a full-time carer for her elderly mother; she is experiencing ongoing and acute financial hardship – she cannot walk the 2 miles from her home to access the community supermarket, the social events, the educational options and the drop-in citizens advice bureau sessions. She cannot afford the time it takes to walk to the centre's location on days when she is not in constant pain. She cannot access the local Healthy Living Centre without a private taxi for medical appointments – which are numerous and ongoing for her and her elderly mother. Life is made so much more difficult due to these specific barriers. She is ground down, depressed and exhausted by the day-to-day logistics of trying to help herself and her mum attend essential services by the lack of affordable and geographical transport routes."

Community Transport provider

Recommendations

3 | 5 | 6 | 9 | 10 | 12 | 16 | 23 | 24

The visitor economy

The visitor economy in the East is valued at more than £10 billion a year, with much of the sector concentrated in rural and coastal communities. The sector is affected by several unique transport challenges which have significant socio-economic impacts and require coordination and strategic thinking to overcome.

Peak travel hours in the East vary significantly in part due to the visitor economy. This is the case for all modes. At the macro level, travel patterns vary significantly from season to season. On a more granular level, different times of day and days of the week see different patterns, for example, the night-time flow of people travelling for social activities and the rebound of leisure rail travel following the Covid-19 pandemic. On an even more granular level, there are very short specific super-peaks which may last hours or days such as hot days, bank holidays, events or tourists viewing certain animal migration patterns or natural phenomena. Each presents different travel challenges and opportunities. Recognising and modelling these patterns is the first step to planning a system that can account for them.

These seasonal peaks can put rural and isolated coastal communities under a lot of pressure from large increases in private vehicles. Congestion, poor parking behaviour, large numbers of vehicles on narrow roads and risky driver behaviour create additional difficulties for local people on their everyday journeys. A new pressure on public EV chargers is also emerging. Visit East of England is committed to encouraging sustainable transport options for visitors and is actively working with their members and transport operators to promote non-car trips within the region.

Public transport operators should engage more fully with visitor destinations, local government and other aligned stakeholders when planning their network, making changes and delivering the service. Visitor destinations have insight into visitor patterns. Data including parking demand, ticketing, mobile phone data and visitor destination information could be used to inform local transport plans and operational decisions. Early stakeholder engagement when route planning provides the best chances to adequately manage the varying and unusual travel behaviours. Travel for leisure has increased following the Covid-19 pandemic and there is an opportunity to align public transport provision more fully to this new demand.

"Improved transport options would open-up the potential of multi-modal travel, providing a network to allow people to make trips to medical, education, retail and tourist destinations. Bus services running more frequently and on evenings and weekends would make them a viable alternative to the private car"

Local Transport Authority

Transport East has explored new technology to help with transport planning. BERTIE[9] is an agent-based model (ABM) that looks at how people move around the region considering age, gender and what transport options are available. It can test future scenarios based on policy or project interventions for example increased electric vehicle uptake or the increased the cost of driving. The ABM can then accurately analyse results recording things like how people will travel, how they adapt to changes, and who could have chosen a certain mode but did not. In testing future scenarios Transport East are working to include seasonal differences in future modelling within BERTIE.

Recommendations

15 | 16 | 18 | 22 | 25

9 https://www.transporteast.gov.uk/bertie/

Decarbonisation

We received less evidence that focused on reducing emissions than on other issues, but almost all comments received referencing the issue suggested the East will struggle to meet net zero by 2050. There was a view that the reliance on private vehicles and lack of viable alternatives would make the transition to a decarbonised transport system too slow. Respondents highlighted the indiscernible approach to decarbonisation in urban and rural areas. An urban transport network and urban users' needs are very different to rural areas, so a different approach is required to decarbonise rural transport.

One respondent pointed to the government's *Transport Decarbonisation Plan* (2021)[10] and its overwhelming focus on urban and semi-urban locations.

Several respondents expressed concern over the declining air quality in the region, particularly in areas surrounding Southend, Norwich and Ipswich. Harmful pollutants have a range of negative health effects, and while this is more pronounced in urban areas it can still be an issue in rural communities especially in locations close to major roads or at particular points in the day. Respondents expressed concerns about the state of the air that their children would grow up in.

> *"With a better public transport network people would be more likely to leave their car at home for trips which would benefit the environment, reducing CO2 emissions and associated health of both our planet and the population."*
>
> **Local Transport Authority**

10 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/transport-decarbonisation-plan

Recommendations

1 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 14 | 24

Evidence, monitoring and evaluation

In general, there are low levels of understanding across the sector, including in the East, of which transport schemes and inventions are most successful in rural areas, why they are successful and how we can replicate that success. Even less so with schemes which concern multiple disciplines like health, education and leisure activities. More should be done systemically to capture short, medium and long-term evidence across a range of metrics. There is the potential to involve academic partners in this work, alongside local and national government and STBs. The work of the Transport East Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence is seeking to address this gap, working with the other STBs to draw together good practice and provide advice for local authorities and other partners. There is an opportunity for this work to go further with additional resources and funding.

Recommendations

3 | 5 | 7 | 8 | 18 | 20

Considering rural needs in policy and plan making

Our local authorities understand their communities best and seek to provide the best transport services they can within their financial constraints, capacity and capability. They must also adhere to central government guidance for both plan making, funding bids and scheme development. As raised earlier, there is a view that central government policy does not reflect rural needs fully, although this is improving. Greater freedoms for local authorities to set plans and have the integrated funding needed to deliver against agreed outcomes should improve the situation for rural communities.

Local transport authorities within the Transport East area are pursuing devolution settlements with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), which will increase the level of integration they can bring to planning and delivering transport in their area.

Local authorities are also in the process of developing new local transport plans, but the disconnect in responsibilities in two-tier local authorities between land-use planning and transport planning creates barriers to integrated planning. The allocation of funding from development through Section 106 and CIL agreements made with developers on transport provision can also lead to inconsistencies in quality or connections in rural communities.

When Local Authorities are plan-making, they should clearly demonstrate how rural transport needs have been evidenced and considered, how initiatives will help deliver local priorities, and how they will monitor change. Local Transport Authorities should ensure that rural mobility challenges are consistently weaved throughout plan-making, recognising the important role transport plays in facilitating other key policy goals.

Recommendations

1 | 2 | 9 | 10 | 13 | 15 | 16 | 20

A rural transport group

Currently, rural Local Transport Authorities do not have a single network to share best practice, collaborate on research or campaigns, upskill people and unify the rural voice when engaging with national Government. The Urban Transport Group (UTG) fills this role successfully for city region transport authorities.

Establishing a rural transport group, in a similar vein to UTG, would strengthen the voice of rural transport and provide rural Local Transport Authorities with a wealth of experience and knowledge to draw on. To achieve the long-term, strategic rural transport goals that require support from the government, the more stakeholders advocating for the cause the greater the chance of the policy goals coming to fruition. With regards to best practice, training and collaboration, the wider the network the greater the breadth of expertise to work with and learn from.

Transport East's Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence is undertaking some of this activity, and there is an opportunity to expand the remit further in the longer term subject to additional resourcing.

Recommendations

8 | 17 | 20 | 21

Improving the situation

Throughout our evidence, stakeholders suggested several ways to overcome rural mobility barriers and the lessen impacts of those barriers. These came in a variety of forms from recommendations and gaps in evidence to specific schemes and initiatives. We explore these in the section below and outline our recommendations for Transport East and local partners, local and national government.

Opportunities and initiatives

Community transport

In the written and oral evidence, many stakeholders praised the role community transport (CT) plays in filling the gaps in the East's transport network. CT services provide for the most disadvantaged people in the region, often acting as the only form of transport available to people with accessibility challenges or who live in extremely remote areas.

> *"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"*
>
> **Local Authority**

Despite this, CT often is not given the same consideration as other modes in transport planning at the local and national levels. It's crucial CT is rightly seen as a critical part of rural transport planning. Transport planners should consider CT connectivity with other modes and think about CT's place in an integrated system which encourages multi-modal travel.

CT providers are largely charities and face ongoing challenges around funding, staffing – as the majority are volunteers and often older people themselves, the regulatory environment and wider relationships with commissioning bodies.

CT should also be considered in any pilot schemes which intersect governmental departments and public services. Particularly for collaboration between transport operators and health service providers, the inclusion of CT services will be hugely valuable as much of the current ridership uses CT provision to travel to and from health services.

Recommendations

4 | 6 | 7 | 9 | 18 | 26

Recommendations

8 | 10 | 12 | 13 | 17 | 18

Land use and development

Multiple operators and local government stakeholders stressed the need to coordinate land use planning and transport planning more effectively.

Most rural areas operate with two-tier local authority governance, with district councils responsible for land use planning and county councils responsible for transport planning and delivery. Despite requirements to engage at both levels, this creates barriers to aligning transport and local development plans. This is exacerbated by capacity and resourcing challenges across all levels of local government.

Enhanced collaboration between planning and transport officers in Local Authorities at all stages of plan making and in assessing new developments would improve alignment. But this also needs to be led from the centre, with increased engagement and strategic alignment between the Department of Levelling Up, Homes and Communities (DLUHC) responsible for land use planning policy and the Department for Transport (DfT).

Good transport connections allow for developments to thrive economically, and most importantly green transport choices facilitate sustainable development. Without better integrating the two disciplines, development risks defaulting to the car putting increasing pressure on local road networks.

Land use, transport and service delivery planning integration is especially important for the planning and provision of essential services. Service hubs offer the benefits of multiple services located in the same building or site. Service hubs, or community hubs can reduce overall travel and encourage sustainable journeys. However, if they are not serviced by public transport and active travel, they risk their overall success. When developing hubs, developers or service planners must consider how the site will be sustainably connected.

There is a further opportunity for increased sharing of existing good practice across the East, support for adopting up to date transport planning guidance and for the greater engagement between local authority officers in supporting specialisms or with similar geographies to learn from each other. Stakeholders have suggested a greater role for Sub-national Transport Bodies in increasing links between land use and transport planning, but this would expand their current remit and require additional resourcing.

Maintenance priority

A considerable number of maintenance issues were raised by respondents. These concerns can create additional barriers to everyday journeys. Many related to improvements to wheeling, walking and cycling infrastructure to encourage mode shift away from cars for shorter journeys. These included:

- Hedge trimming – Trimming overgrown hedges and removing other debris that blocks active travel routes
- Signage – Increasing the number of signs and reviewing the strategic location of signs
- Public right of way – Properly maintaining public paths to allow for easy access
- Lighting – Well-lit active travel routes and public spaces to improve safety.
- Cycling infrastructure – Clearly signed cycle paths that are ideally segregated from roads
- Verges – Increasing verge space and improving the condition of road verges

Addressing these concerns improves knowledge of active travel routes available to people, and the security and safety of the infrastructure, which will improve attractiveness. It is recognised that constrained local government finances have impacted the ability to prioritise maintenance across the full network, and fund parish councils to fulfil their responsibilities, but this is an area that warrants greater attention at both national and local levels.

Recommendations

1 | 2 | 11 | 24

Evidencing social value in transport decisions

While there is a growing library of evidence around the social value of transport services, the application of this information to improve decision making can be challenging and is an area is worth enhancing to drive better, longer term decisions around transport provision – both at a strategic, central government level and in local government.

Respondents were concerned about bus services that were withdrawn with little communication or engagement, resulting in disrupted journeys including for education, employment and appointments. The focus on commerciality in bus service provision, and following reductions in local authority funding support, means services are withdrawn with little ability to assess the wider social value those services bring.

Withdrawn routes have consequences for other public services, the catchment areas for health services for example. There are also long-term economic impacts which are not captured when examining a route's feasibility. For example, a service connecting people to training courses will lead to higher skilled and better paid jobs. Services connecting people to local commerce could be the deciding factor in whether businesses expand or not. When deciding on the future of a route, service or scheme, a transport access impact assessment which considers these wider social, economic and environmental factors would be valuable.

When services are changed – both transport and the location of other public sector services – a transport access impact assessment should be undertaken to analyse the impacts this will have on the people's ability to access key locations, the wider transport network, economy, environment and other essential services. This information can then be aligned with an Equality Impact Assessment to better understand impacted people, especially those with protected characteristics. Basic environmental impacts of transport changes should also be captured, particularly around carbon emissions.

Sub-national Transport Bodies could assist in developing a framework for assessing these changes and, along with local authorities would hold data that could be useful in undertaking assessments. Working with government, STBs could also develop a social value module for transport business case appraisals to better deliver priority government outcomes from transport investment.

Recommendations

3 | 12 | 20

Car sharing

Informal car sharing is used often in rural communities and car clubs and lift sharing were initiatives that multiple respondents felt were underutilised in the region. Some organisations are going further to enable more efficient use of private vehicles supporting initiatives including community car clubs, volunteer schemes and more substantial schemes.

Mobilityways was one such organisation that responded to the call for evidence. It supports employers to decarbonise their employee's commute as part of a company's CSR commitments and net zero journey. They supply tools for businesses to measure, reduce and report commuter emissions.

To encourage collaboration between Mobilityways and the private sector, businesses must realise the value of decarbonising commutes. Understanding the environmental, social and long-term economic value attached to sustainable transport will help justify businesses to commit to the services Mobilityways and other similar companies offer.

There is the opportunity to use tools like those Mobilityways provides to look at clusters of businesses such as business parks on the fringes of towns, encourage sharing for major events and other notable trip attractors.

Recommendations

7 | 8 | 12

"Community car clubs can play an important in areas where population density makes commercial car clubs less viable, and 'peer to peer' platforms support individuals in sharing their own vehicle. CoMoUK produces an annual car club report that provides a wealth of information on car sharing on areas including mode shift, carbon impact, frequency of use, behavioural change, cost savings, health impact, and demographics."

National Transport Charity

Demand Responsive Transport

Several Local Transport Authorities in the East are running Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) including schemes such as Norfolk's 'Flexibus' and Essex's 'DigiGo'. These services afford people living in heavily rural areas the flexibility to choose when they travel without the need to own a private car. These schemes were initiated through the Rural Mobility Fund and are building patronage, expanding their reach and monitoring provision to demonstrate long term viability.

Schemes are open to all members of the community and have evidence of patronage from a wide range of users including older people. Some also apply the DfT funded £2 fare cap. As with community transport, DRT services also boast a strong social element as they allow for socialising while making the journey and encourage people living in remote areas to travel to social activities in groups.

DRT services are suited to rural areas, replacing traditional bus routes which are harder to sustain commercially. They can also act as good first and last-mile journeys, connecting people to mobility hubs and other modes of transport. If the booking system is simple, services are well marketed at the start and services offer a seamless user experience it is clear these services attract customers.

As these schemes are being established and managed by Local Transport Authorities, there is some concern that rural communities on the boundaries of authorities will benefit less from the roll-out of DRT services. Once established, there is the opportunity to use regional data to identify viable areas for cross-boundary services and explore regional operating models to increase the reach and reduce the cost of operations.

Recommendations

4 | 6 | 9 | 19

Tourism and sustainable transport

As a region with a large visitor economy, focused on our natural coastal and rural environments, much of the travel by visitors to and within the region is by car. This creates seasonable and event peaks and puts pressure on local roads and places.

Visit East of England (who cover Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire) and Essex County Council are both committed to encouraging visitors to come and travel around the region by more sustainable means and the call for evidence heard from individual businesses in the visitor economy who are investing in assets like e-bikes and EV chargers to encourage lower carbon journeys. We also heard how public transport services and walking and cycling routes were promoted.

Local authorities are also working in partnership to promote more sustainable tourism. Norfolk is the first county to work with Good Journey to promote visitor attractions across the full county, with Suffolk also now signed up.

Good Journey is an organisation that offers discounts and benefits for car-free journeys to certain visitor attractions across the UK. The discounts offer sufficient economic incentives to encourage sustainable travel to and from visitor locations.

Those working in the visitor economy can go further by promoting trips which are accessible by green modes providing tourists and locals with the information to feel confident travelling by public transport or active travel.

Recommendations

11 | 22 | 25

Active travel

Cycling, walking, and wheeling are the greenest, healthiest and cheapest modes of transport. Respondents to the call for evidence were keen to see initiatives to encourage active travel seen in urban areas expanded out to rural communities.

Good infrastructure is essential to improving connections, safety, and confidence. Sustrans' work to consistently improve the National Cycle Network is valuable, alongside initiatives like the Rebellion Way in Norfolk supported by Cycling UK.

But to embed change you need to work closely with communities and one initiative doing just this is Essex Pedal Power. The programme from Active Essex Local Delivery Pilot provides free bicycles to residents in the county's most disadvantaged communities including isolated rural

> *"Compared to other flashier schemes, rural cycle paths are a proven solution with an extremely high benefit-to-cost ratio."*
>
> **Local Transport User**

coastal areas. This scheme improves the public health of these communities and connects individuals to jobs, education and places in a sustainable way.

The Essex Pedal Power initiative is complemented by supplementary measures to improve active travel infrastructure. Providing the vehicles gives people the means to cycle, but ensuring safe secure cycle paths encourages uptake.

E-bikes possess the capability to drastically improve rural active travel journeys if they are adopted throughout the East. Some of the restrictions when travelling by a traditional bicycle are avoided with E-bikes, most notably longer journeys and challenging inclines. They also boast all the same health, environmental and economic positives of traditional cycling. E-bikes widen the access to active travel, to those with lower levels of existing fitness or medical conditions. They are also proven to be an effective gateway into pursuing cycling as a long-term activity.

E-bike provision is currently inconsistent in the region. There are rural areas in the UK that have introduced E-bike trials which the East can learn from, particularly around parking and security[11]. A trial in a popular coastal town, or a city with the boundaries extended to nearby rural areas, would provide the knowledge and evidence to help expand E-bike provision in more parts of the East. Several businesses and organisations expressed interest in utilising E-bikes, with most certain it would positively increase their customer base. Some tourism businesses have already invested in E-bikes to rent to customers, but the data around this, including the take up by visitors is not collected.

Recommendations

7 | 8 | 11 | 18 | 21

11 https://think.aber.ac.uk/the-e-move-trial-e-cycling-practices-in-rural-welsh-communities-and-the-potential-for-low-carbon-transport-transitions/

EV charging infrastructure

As with E-bikes, electric vehicles (EVs) have a key role to play in a sustainable rural transport network. The East currently houses 6.6% of UK chargepoints, despite having closer to 10% of the population[12]. There are also discrepancies regarding chargepoint location within the region. Similar to the rest of the UK, cities and larger towns are where the majority of chargepoints are located. An increase in the number of chargepoints, accompanied by increased grid capacity, is required to keep up with the uptake of EVs.

Individual respondents praised recent electrification trends, but the two most common concerns were range anxiety and price. Similar concerns were expressed by businesses who were open to installing chargepoints on their premises but referenced challenges with grid capacity and the complexity of navigating the systems around installation as a blocker. Local Transport Authorities, charging providers and energy industry stakeholders must plan for the strategic introduction of a charging network that sufficiently complements the increased number of EVs on the road network.

Transport East has recently conducted some research to understand the region's challenges and opportunities for the projected EV uptake, specifically related to charging infrastructure. The TE tool provides an evidence base to plan and prioritise future EV charging infrastructure requirements and sits alongside a report which explores how local authorities, energy providers and private sector charge-point operators can work more effectively to deliver EV chargers in the right place[13].

Ensuring EV charging provision in rural areas is considered in local authority plans and EV shared vehicles are considered in any trials or pilots for rural provision will be important to maximise EV take up in rural areas.

Recommendations

7 | 10 | 18 | 21 | 24

12 https://www.zap-map.com/ev-stats/how-many-charging-points
13 https://www.transporteast.gov.uk/electric-vehicles/

Reducing staff travel

Respondents engaged via the oral evidence sessions described the challenges of attracting and retaining staff, especially if the hours for the role extend beyond the 9-5 work pattern, which is often the case with hospitality, care work, agricultural roles, manufacturing and logistics – many dominant sectors in the East. Several initiatives to manage these challenges were mentioned, with two main ones emerging from more than one business.

Staff accommodation is a common provision for those working in the hospitality sector. This allows staff members to stay overnight on site – either occasionally or for a full season. This model proved a useful solution for people working in extremely remote locations, unusual hours, or both. One of the further education providers referenced the use of this model to attract interns and graduates who otherwise would be prohibited from applying for roles due to travel barriers, including those from rural areas.

Staff minibus services can cater for the needs of employees providing near door-to-door travel. More than one employer who responded referenced providing staff minibuses.

Organisations like Zeelo can support businesses by designing a unique minibus service planned around the needs of their specific employees. Alternatively, the service could be provided in-house if the organisation has the capability. Minibus provision should consider connections with other transport modes, staff working patterns, staff locations and the choice of route. Ultimately the aim is to provide a sustainable and efficient route for the maximum number of employees to take advantage of.

There is the opportunity to go further in this space. Support multiple businesses within an area to work together to explore opportunities for joint staff travel, through data analysis, digital tools and joint workplace travel planning. Within the Government's *Transport Decarbonisation Plan* there was a focus on 'Commute Zero' approach with businesses committing to cut carbon emissions from business and commuter travel. Subject to resourcing there is the opportunity to establish such partnerships in the East, with support from Transport East to include business organisations and local authorities through their workplace travel planning experience.

Recommendations

7 | 15 | 18 | 24

Gaps in evidence

We received a comprehensive range of evidence from various stakeholders spread across disciplines. This was complemented by our Commissioners who are expert stakeholders in their respective fields. However, by the nature of this type of engagement activity, we were unable to capture views from all sectors.

Transport East's Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence welcomes thoughts about the findings and recommendations from anyone interested in rural transport to improve understanding and ensure future work adds the most value to organisations working to improve rural connections.

Some of the groups and issues that were underrepresented were:

- Young people
- Disabled people
- Freight
- Health and transport
- Land use
- Non-hospitality rural businesses

There would be value in the Department for Transport, in collaboration with industry stakeholders, conducting further research on the issues above. A rural network must cater for the needs of all users so we must understand the challenges faced by seldom-heard groups. There is potential to work with academia or through STBs to address some of these evidence gaps.

Recommendation 5

National policy areas

Rural lens on the Department for Transport personas

The further research suggested above could help inform a transport user persona or personas with a strictly rural lens[14]. The Department's work on personas encourages a user-focused approach to transport planning but of the 12 personas only 2 directly reference rural living within their persona, none of them younger people and all merge rural locations with suburban. While there are likely to be similarities between suburban and rural travel choices, the issues are heightened in rural communities and grouping both locations risks policy solutions that do not respond effectively to rural challenges. Evidence from this report and Transport East's Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence, plus any further research from the national government, academia or industry could form the basis of a few rural-specific personas that represent the behaviours, barriers and enablers for customers in rural areas.

Recommendations

5 | 17 | 20

14 https://www.gov.uk/guidance/transport-user-personas-understanding-different-users-and-their-needs

Innovating in rural transport

The DfT's **'Future of Transport: supporting rural transport innovation'** report centres on the role of innovation in overcoming rural mobility challenges. The paper commits additional funding to do exactly this.

So far, the funding for Future Transport Zones, exploring new ways of travelling – aligning digital and transport connectivity integrating transport through apps and paying for transport – has been focused on urban areas. There is an opportunity to use the learnings from current Future Transport Zones to test further what could work most effectively in different non-urban locations.

The Rural Transport Accelerator fund established by the DfT, initiates support for innovative transport solutions for rural areas and can be built on. As the lead Sub-national Transport body on rural mobility, Transport East is expertly placed to develop a trial or pilot to explore and evaluate rural transport innovation.

Innovation was a regular theme throughout the call for evidence. Respondents highlighted bodies doing excellent innovative work, which would be improved with the right support. Other respondents emphasised the importance of innovation in combatting challenges unique to the rural East. A rural innovation competition, hosted by Transport East, would stimulate innovation and could act as a blueprint for other similar competitions in other rural parts of the UK.

In addition, there is the opportunity to identify a rural area to explore a de-regulation 'sandbox' where, in a particular area, regulations governing different forms of transport could be lifted so that the same vehicles could do different journeys (taxis/dial-a-ride/ DRT/community transport/ fixed route buses etc). This could align with the rural Future Transport Zone or could run separately as a comparison trial.

Recommendations

4 | 7 | 18 | 19 | 21

The transport appraisal system

The Treasury's Green Book and the DfT's TAG appraisal system struggle to capture the full range of benefits of transport initiatives in rural areas. While in recent years there has been a greater emphasis placed on the strategic case for a project, the benefit-cost ratio (BCR) too often dictates the success of a scheme This system inherently favours urban areas over rural where population density and other geographical factors lead to greater returns, either commercially or economically. Rural schemes often derive their value from other factors which the current appraisal system may undervalue as the evidence is more complex to measure and assess[15].

The appraisal system also struggles to recognise the cost savings in other sectors realised through transport provision. A well-maintained connected rural public transport and active travel network will incur various health benefits leading to longer-term savings for the health sector. It can provide improved life chances for people through access to training and more skilled, better paid jobs – reducing benefit payments and increasing taxation. It can be difficult to quantify this exactly, but the appraisal system must recognise where cross-sectoral savings can occur and estimate the level of savings.

The Treasury and DfT should recognise the different contexts that rural transport projects operate in and build this lens into the appraisal system. The STBs, and Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence can assist in developing a joint programme to build the full value of rural projects into the appraisal system, subject to future funding.

"Why is rural transport considered in the same financial context as urban transport? Rural transport is understood with the same support 'cost per passenger' figures by many LTAs, despite rural transport for the hard-to-reach areas being more expensive to provide."

Local Transport Authority

Recommendations

3 | 20

15 https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9495/CBP-9495.pdf

Reforming the monitoring and evaluation framework

Part of the problem with the appraisal system is the complications with accurately measuring, monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of projects. It is relatively straightforward to work out the value for money of a project, and how much will it earn compared to what it costs. It is significantly harder to work out the social value of a transport project, or the environmental value associated with decarbonisation. The understanding and valuation of these social and environmental benefits are improving but must be applied consistently.

There is a need for a universal rural framework which can accurately monitor the outcomes of transport projects, especially social and environmental. Once this evaluation framework is in place it can be applied across rural transport schemes to better understand and compare the true value between schemes.

Recommendations

3 | 20

Funding

Funding for rural transport infrastructure and service comes from many sources including commercial businesses and charities but most comes from local government, either through locally sourced income or through central government allocations. Local government funding has been constrained over the last decade which, in transport terms, has led to a greater impact falling on rural communities as non-commercial bus services have been withdrawn and council subsidises have not been able to cover the gap.

Rural areas have historically been allocated less per head of population in Local Government Financial Settlements and on average, rural residents are likely to pay more for services including Council Tax.

The personal spend on transport for those living in rural areas is disproportionately higher, for some around double the amount people living in urban areas spend on a weekly basis. The high cost of fuel has only exacerbated this in recent times.

Funding for local bus services on a per head basis is significantly different in rural areas compared to urban areas, with budgets for both subsidised routes and concessionary fares lower. Further reductions to local authority budgets puts these essential services at further disadvantage and increases pressure on other organisations to step in and fill the gap.

Whilst the government has recognised the situation, the approach to transport investment within rural areas has not been consistent nationally. The £2 bus cap has shown to benefit rural areas due to the increased cost of longer journeys, however the Bus Service Improvement Plan funding saw large discrepancies between allocations to authorities leading to regional differences.

Several DRT pilots are running across the country through the £20 million

Rural Mobility Fund. These pilots are running between April 2021 and March 2025 but beyond the end of this funding, there is no certainty of continuation of these services. The interim evaluation of the pilots indicates that usage has increased over time and there is a clear demand for such services in rural areas.

In the Network North announcement government committed to local integrated transport settlements for local transport authorities outside metropolitan centres in the Midlands and North from 2025 for seven years. This once again creates funding discrepancies between regions. We welcome this long-term approach to funding local transport and recommend government extends this to all local transport authorities in England.

There are other opportunities to fund transport in rural areas such as through S106 agreements secured through planning permission and use of CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) funding, although this varies across the country and is often considered unviable, difficult to secure or challenging to deliver.

Finally, the Sub-national Transport Bodies are part funded by the DfT and are providing a valuable role in drawing together evidence and insight on rural transport from across the UK. They are also sharing good practice with local authorities, increasing local capacity and capability, enhancing the case for investment, and supporting trials and pilot. Transport East hosts the Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence, funded through its government settlement. While the STBs have indicative funding until 2025, there is no certainty of longer-term central government support.

Recommendations

1 | 2 | 7 | 8 | 13 | 20 | 21

Summary of recommendations

The call for evidence 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 with other parts of the public sector, operators, businesses and wider stakeholder interests to drive change across multiple rural areas.

In working through these points, the Commissioners alighted on a set of recommendations to be progressed across all levels and sectors. 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 with the recommendations.

Transport East's Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence will provide the mechanism for identifying the practical next steps for these recommendations and for monitoring progress.

Recommendations for central government

1. Focus on building long-term capacity and capability within local authorities to support innovation in rural transport

2. Expand the Local Integrated Transport Settlements to cover all local transport authorities in England

3. Work with Sub-national Transport Bodies to develop a social value module for transport business case appraisals including monitoring and evaluation, to better deliver government priority outcomes from transport investment

4. Establish a rural regulatory 'sandbox' area to explore how different forms of transport could be used more effectively, if the regulatory environment could be flexed

5. Work with academia and regional partners to focus future research into rural transport on evidence gaps including young people, disabled people, freight and rural businesses

6. Continue with £2 fare cap beyond 2024 and ensure concessionary fares are applied and funded consistently across all bus operators, Community Transport and DRT services, including the fare cap

7. Work with the Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence to fund, deliver and evaluate rural pilots that address current research gaps potentially through a specifically rural 'Future Transport Zone' or innovation pilot

8. Increased and longer-term funding for the Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence, to maximise its impact and create a resource all English rural authorities can use to share good practice and drive efficiencies

Recommendations for local government

9. Ensure flexible bus services (including Community Transport & DRT) are considered as an integral part of transport planning at national, regional and local levels

10. Land use and development: Better join up between transport & land use planning for rural areas in all levels of government, to increase viability of rural services and maximise opportunities for sustainable journeys

11. Prioritise maintenance and improvement of rural public transport, walking, wheeling and cycling infrastructure within places and to key destinations, to reduce car dependency for short trips

12. Undertake transport access impact assessments to include social, environmental and longer-term economic factors when public service locations, or transport service provisions are changed to ensure rural residents are not further negatively affected

13. Consider how local financial levers could be used to support increased transport provision, for example parking revenues, developer funds, visitor levies, business rate supplements

14. Align maintenance, incident planning and climate resilience planning to reduce transport impacts of weather events on isolated communities

15. Access to jobs: Local authorities and Enhanced Partnerships to foster increased collaboration between employers, operators, education providers and policy makers, especially in rural areas

16. Access to education and training: As skills responsibility returns to local authorities, embed rural needs in new and existing plans, programmes and funding opportunities, considering transport access

Recommendations for Transport East and partners

17. Transport East's Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence to break down barriers across the public sector to integrate rural access needs into decision making

18. Transport East to bid to develop a multidisciplinary area pilot: Joining data or trialling new mobility hubs to provide evidence and a model for wider application

19. Transport East to build on the work from Midlands Connect and Transport for the West Midlands on a model for integrated ticketing in the East, and explore the value of regional integration of digital customer information improve cross-boundary and multiple operator journeys

20. STB Rural Mobility group to work with rural experts to strengthen the evidence for the value of rural services and strategic case for investment

21. STB Rural Mobility group to develop 'rural pilot guidance' to share good practice, speed roll-out, improve evidence and drive efficiencies

22. Transport East, local government and operators to consider weekend, evening and seasonal travel demand impacts within analysis, planning and delivery

23. Transport East to work with Enhanced Partnerships, Transport Operators and representative groups to advocate for investment in solutions to barriers to public transport for seen and unseen disabilities

24. Transport East to explore opportunities to bring a partnership together under a 'Commute Zero' umbrella with a rural location included

25. Visitor bodies to work with destinations to increase the promotion and incentivisation of public and active transport. Fostering better collaboration between public transport operators & visitor destinations to increase sustainable tourism destinations including piloting improvement

26. Access to health: Establish mechanisms for greater engagement between health and transport service providers to enhance evidence, planning, operations and outcomes

Conclusion

Improving outcomes for people living and working in rural communities is directly linked to improving rural transport provision. The views gathered through this research add further evidence to the growing consensus around the challenges and impacts of rural connectivity. The issues discussed align with those reported in the Department for Transport's own evidence, but highlight particular challenges in the East linked to the visitor economy and the socio-economic geography of the region.

The call for evidence 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 evident and multi-layered. It will take all levels of government, working in partnership with other parts of the public sector, operators, businesses and wider stakeholder interests to drive change in rural transport provision. It will also take increased and longer-term funding, and potentially changes to regulation to increase innovation in service provision.

But the opportunities to powerfully improve people's lives now and in the future are myriad. Improvements in rural transport can reduce costs to the health service, the cost of support through the benefits system and increase tax take through increased business and income growth. The challenge is capturing these, evidencing them clearly and delivering them in a complex operational environment.

There is progress from central government in recognising that rural transport needs a different approach to urban, and generally will require differing investment approaches, particularly in the **'Future of Transport: supporting rural transport innovation'** report. These improvements are welcome, but funding has not been allocated fairly across regions so not all rural communities are seeing benefits. Better coordination between central government departments working on rural issues is also needed, to create a more aligned policy environment and maximise the non-financial levers.

Organisations at all levels are committed to making a difference to rural transport, from operators and businesses, to local authorities, community transport and rural service providers. However, their resourcing and capacity to join up to make things work better on the ground is compromised. The Sub-national Transport Bodies, and particularly Transport East's Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence provide a regional space to collaborate more effectively, learn from innovators and share good practice to speed progress and evidence what works.

Through this work, the Rural Strategy Hub Commissioners alighted on a set of recommendations to be progressed across all levels and sectors. Due to the range of issues covered 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.

We thank everyone who gave their time and expertise to inform this report and look forward to working in partnership to make rural transport better.

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TRANSPORTEAST