

TRANSPORTEAST

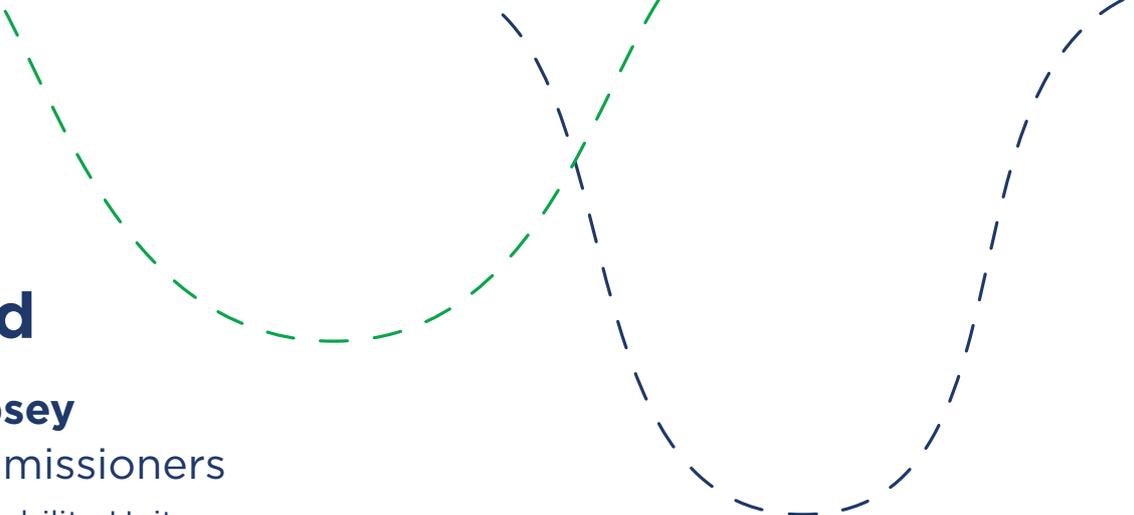
SUMMARY

# RURAL CONNECTIONS

Transport challenges and  
opportunities for communities  
in the East



MARCH | 2024



# Foreword

**Dr Scott Copsey**

Chair of Commissioners

Director, Smart Mobility Unit  
University of Hertfordshire

**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and vulnerable people when bus services are withdrawn at short notice.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



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**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

# 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'<sup>1</sup>.
- 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.

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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.
- 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.

## 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.



## 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

1. New modes of transport must be safe and secure by design
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
3. Walking, wheeling, cycling and micromobility must be enabled as the best options for the short rural journeys
4. Affordable and accessible public transport and shared mobility must be fundamental to an efficient rural transport system
5. New transport modes and services should support a rapid transition to zero emissions and be adapted to climate change
6. Innovation should improve road efficiency and reduce congestion by promoting shared mobility, improving user choice and consolidating freight
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
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
9. Data from new transport services must be shared where appropriate to improve both choice and the operation of the transport system

## Recommendations

1 | 5 | 10 | 23 | 26

1 | 2 | 3 | 8 | 12 | 17 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 26

3 | 4 | 5 | 7 | 8 | 11 | 12 | 25

6 | 13 | 19 | 22

1 | 7 | 8 | 14 | 24 | 25

7 | 10 | 13 | 22 | 25

1 | 4 | 10 | 13 | 18

1 | 2 | 9 | 10 | 12 | 13 | 15  
16 | 20 | 22 | 26

4 | 7 | 18 | 19 | 21

# 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.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks very much to the following people for their support throughout the project:

- The Commissioners for their time, expertise and guidance
- Everyone who replied to the call for evidence
- Everyone who promoted the call for evidence
- All stakeholders who took part in the oral evidence sessions
- Transport East for commissioning the work
- JFG Communications for support as the Secretariat to the Commissioners



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