

Rural Roots Limited Routes

A study into young peoples transport
access to education and training



Executive Summary

Introduction

Project background

In 2024, Transport East published its Rural Connections¹ report to understand the transport challenges and opportunities for the region. The report identified young people's challenges in accessing education, training and employment, but highlighted the underrepresentation of young people's voices in the call for evidence.

Keen to understand how transport and mobility effects and impacts young people in the region (youth aged 16 – 24 years old), Transport East launched a research programme to address this evidence gap.

This study provides the analysis and insights gathered from this research programme to help shape policy recommendations for Transport East and its partners.

Objectives

The project's aim was to explore the transport challenges and opportunities for young people in accessing education and training opportunities, resulting in a report and set of recommendations developed from the evidence gathered.

The data collected from the programme will help to address and inform the following objectives:

- To identify key findings, correlation or causation of how **transport availability** and access to transport options **impact post-16 outcomes** in relation to education, training and further education.
- To enhance the variety and **quality of evidence** available relating to transport in the Transport East region, specifically, **transport for young people**.

Methodology

A research programme was conducted to address the evidence gap on transport issues young people face in accessing education and training opportunities. The programme included a four-pronged approach:

- **Desktop review** of available research to provide background understanding in relation to young people's access in rural area at a national level,
- **Stakeholder engagement** through one-to-one meetings with authorities and education provider to understand their challenges and views of transport and how it affects them and the wider sector.
- **Online consultations** with local authorities, education providers, youth charities and wider stakeholders with opportunities for free text responses on transport issues that students face when accessing education, apprenticeships or training.
- **Young People Survey**, covering questions on their usual travel to access education and training in the region, as well as their perception on travel, the challenges they face and the influence of transport on decision making.

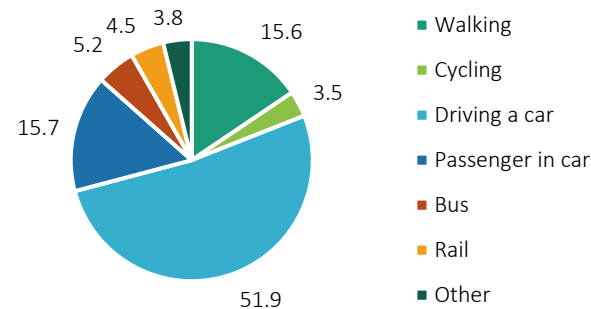
Context setting & desktop research

Context setting

Within the Transport East region, over 33% of the population live in rural areas, which is significantly higher than the national average (17%). This proportion is mirrored in the youth population, with 30.3% of young people aged 16-24 living in rural areas.

Transport East's road network comprises of a combination of A-roads, B-roads, and smaller roads which link rural communities to larger towns and the strategic road network. Key towns are served by a rail network that supports commuter travel and provides connectivity to key destinations. However, the rail network faces challenges related to capacity constraints and ageing infrastructure. Bus services within large parts of the region are limited, especially in large rural expanses between towns. These challenges are reflected in the region's travel patterns, which exhibit a strong dependence upon private car usage, even in the 16–24-year-old range. However, it is important to consider the variation of life circumstances within the 16–24-year-old age group, which can have an influence upon shaping travel choices and mobility.

Method of travel to work for 16-24 year olds in Transport East region (%)



Desktop research

Numerous studies have identified key transport challenges affecting access to education and employment within rural areas. These challenges are summarised in table on the right

When considering graduate statistics across the Transport East region, large towns prove more effective at attracting and retaining graduates, compared to small towns and rural areas. Although, the statistics for most areas within the Transport East region fall behind the national average. While graduate retention rates and general graduate statistics are not directly influenced by transport issues,

Key challenges

Long distance and travel times: young people in rural towns and fringes travel 30% more than those in urban conurbations.

High cost of transport: Transport costs limit the mobility for one in five young people, with apprentices particularly affected.

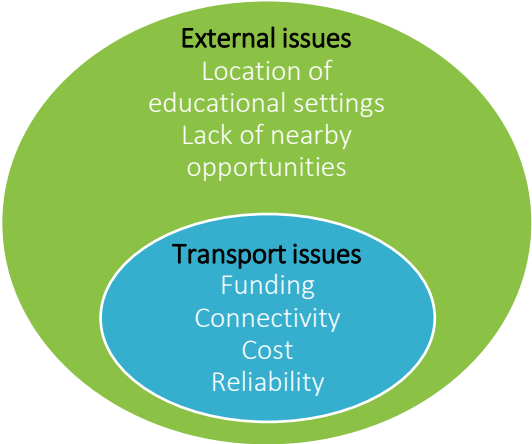
Availability of transport options: the lack of reliable public transport options forces many rural students to attend only nearby schools/colleges, limiting their options for further education and employment. 86% of young people cite unreasonable public transport services as a reason for wanting to leave rural areas altogether.

transport can play a crucial role in shaping decisions and opportunities made by young people.

Meeting notes & online consultation summary

Stakeholder engagement

One-on-one meetings with representatives from county councils and educational providers, were undertaken to understand the intricacies of the multiple stakeholders and sector networks that are involved in the provision of transport for post-16 young people. Key themes emerging from discussions emphasised transport as a critical issue.



To address these challenges, several opportunities were proposed, including the introduction of discounted travel schemes, engagement with travel operators, and improved active travel routes.

Online consultation

An online consultation was conducted to gather insights from Transport East’s local authorities, educational institutions, training providers, and wider stakeholders in the education sector. The survey covered topics such as transport concerns students may have, outreach programmes available, and transport support for students.

The top 3 areas of concern regarding travel are presented in the table below.

Top 3 areas of concerns
Availability of transport options
Cost of travel
Distance to be travelled

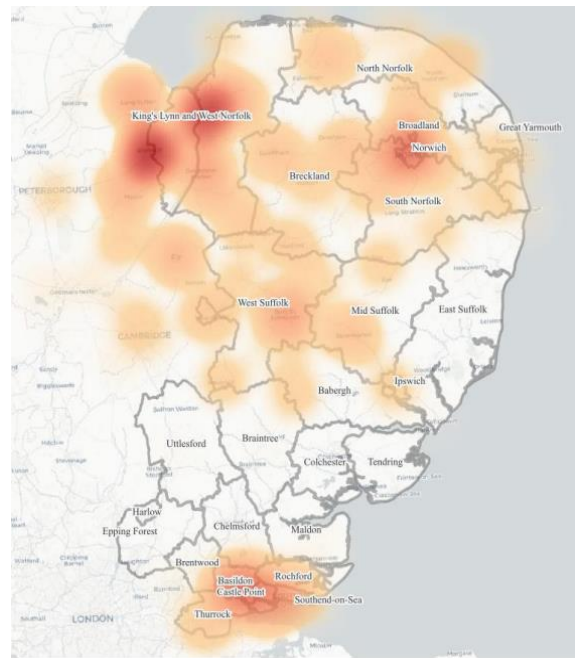
In addition, the following themes emerged from students’ additional commentary regarding transport issues they face when accessing education:

- Lack of connections / hubs
- Cost
- Communication of information
- Long distance / travel times
- Availability of options
- Convenience / frequency
- Safety

Young People Survey

Response demographics

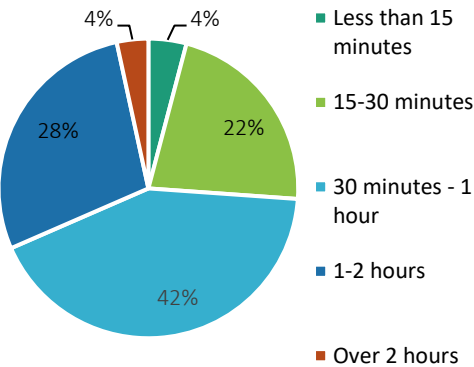
A survey was conducted to assess the views of local students within the Transport East region. 999 responses (aged 16-24) were analysed. As part of the location analysis, 41% of respondents lived within rural areas, and 59% of respondents lived within urban areas. The map below highlights the density and distribution of survey respondents.



Daily journeys

Journey length

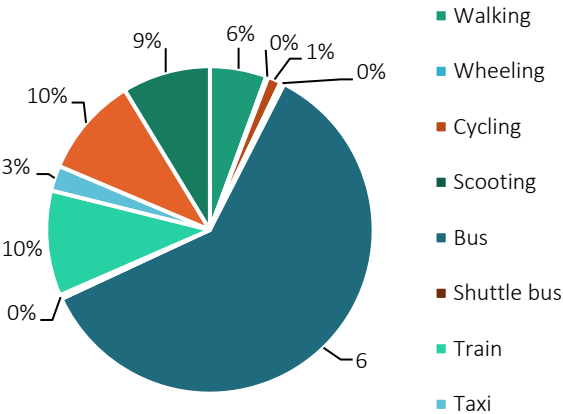
Overall average daily journey length



When considering journey length by location, rural residents were more likely to have longer daily journeys compared to their urban counterparts. 37% of rural respondents reported journey lengths exceeding 1 hour, compared to 27% for urban respondents.

Mode share

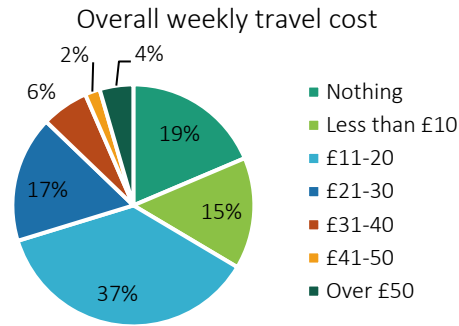
Overall mode share



When examined by location, urban respondents reported greater instances of walking/wheeling/cycling/scooting (10%), compared to rural respondents (3%). Rural respondents reported a greater dependence upon private cars (12%), compared to urban respondents (9%).

Young People Survey

Cost



Rural respondents tended to spend more per week compared to urban respondents. Rural students spend an average of £16.75, compared to urban students’ average of £15.63.

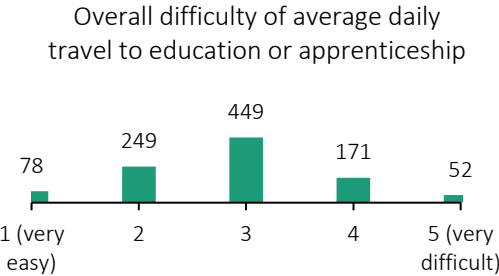
Journey length by mode and location of residence

Analysis revealed that urban respondents experienced shorter travel distances via both bus and private car, compared to rural respondents. 31% of urban respondents stated having bus journeys exceeding 1 hour, compared to 50% for rural respondents. Among urban based respondents, 44% of private car journeys took 30 minutes to 1 hour, compared to 52% for rural based

respondents. Rural respondents were also more reliant upon taxis as a key mode of transport.

Difficulty of transport

Rated difficulty of transport



Difficulty was generally consistent across rural and urban responses; however, a slightly higher proportion of rural respondents rated their travel as more difficult. 18% of rural residents rated their journey a difficulty of 4 out of 5 compared to 16% of urban respondents.

Barriers to public transport usage

Car users were asked to highlight the barriers preventing them from using public transport.

Top 3 barrier to public transport usage

- Time taken to complete journey (281 response)
- Cost (206 response)
- Timetable does not match schedule (166 response)

The absence of nearby public transport connections and timetable misalignment was a more prevalent issue in rural responses compared to urban responses. 20% of rural responses cited the absence of nearby public transport connections as a barrier compared to 10% of urban responses.

Difficulties caused by transport

More than 70% of respondents indicated that transport made it difficult to arrive on time. 362 responses stated transport made it difficult to socialise with friends, and 320 stated that transport has made it difficult to attend whole days of education. Transport posed a greater barrier to participation in clubs, sports, societies and other extracurricular activities for rural respondents (35%) than for urban respondents (26%).

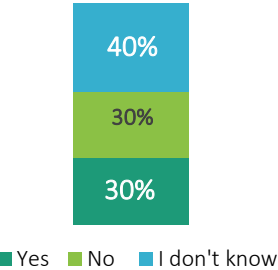
Young People Survey

Awareness of travel support

When asked about the awareness of travel support, the largest number of responses (634) were aware of parking on-site, followed by 621 students aware of general travel support. Students were least aware of service agreements with transport operators and promotions/discounts with local operators. Both rural and urban respondents were similarly aware of the available travel support.

Influence of transport upon student choice

Overall percentage of whether transport influences educational choice



A higher percentage of rural compared to urban respondents (32% and 29% respectively), highlighted that transport did inform their choice.

Free text responses

Students were provided the opportunity to offer any additional transport insights. Several key themes emerged:

Availability of services

Buses during peak times were overcrowded, at capacity, had long wait times, and arrived too early/late.

Cost

Unaffordable bus and train fares, high fuel costs, and inadequate travel bursaries.

Reliability of transport

Frequent delays, cancellations and unpredictability of buses and trains, result in students being late for college.

Safety

Heightened levels of stress due to overcrowding on buses, and fears of walking in the dark.

Transport accessibility

Lack of accessible buses for wheelchair users, and services that consistently reach key destinations within rural areas.

Communication of information

Lack of live bus tracking options sometimes lead to delays, affecting attendance. Additionally, last-minute cancellations without notice lead to students struggling to find alternative transport modes.

Secondary consequences and commentary

The key issues and themes identified in the free text response were found to have secondary consequences, such as:

- The lack of transport reliability and communication can often lead to students starting their day earlier or resort to alternative solutions, such as relying upon parents/carers to travel.
- Limited bus services have led to overcrowding, capacity issues, and poor cleanliness of buses. In response, some students have called for more frequent, higher-capacity buses (double decker buses).
- Public buses fail to provide direct access to campuses resulting in calls for dedicated college bus/coach services that could improve accessibility.