



**University of
Hertfordshire UH**

Rural Transport Learning Network Roundtables 2023-24

Roundtable One: The future of rural public transport

Summary

This report documents the first in a series of roundtable discussions in 2023/24 commissioned and sponsored by Transport East¹ for the Rural Transport Learning Network and organised by the Smart Mobility Unit at the University of Hertfordshire.

The series builds on earlier roundtables hosted by the University of Hertfordshire between 2020 and 2022 to address the shortage of research and policy on transport outside cities and in rural areas.

The format for this roundtable was a two hour online meeting by Zoom and consisted of presentations by speakers followed by questions and discussion, both verbally and via the chat function.

The theme for this roundtable was the future of public transport outside cities in rural areas. Topics considered were:

- Lessons from recent public transport initiatives in rural areas
- Wider benefits from rural public transport
- Ways forward for communities, operators and local authorities in safeguarding and improving public transport in areas outside cities.

There were 24 participants. Sectors represented were: national, sub-national and local government, technology/innovation, transport operator, transport consultancy, academic research, non-governmental organisations. Stephen Joseph chaired the discussion.

The meeting heard from seven speakers covering diverse approaches to rural transport:

- Beate Kubitz and James West, Padam - Frequency is freedom, but is on-demand Better?
- Andrew Highfield, Hertfordshire County Council - Bus Service Improvement Plan
- Lee Robinson, Transport for Wales – Rural Agenda
- Melanie Watson, Consultant – Future of Rural Public Transport in Cornwall
- Niki Park, Norfolk County Council – Norfolk’s Flexibus+
- Roger French, Consultant – Rural Public Transport, A Passenger’s Perspective.

Cornwall County Council has concentrated on major investment and long term partnership with operators to achieve an integrated fixed route network. Cornwall is seeking to build ridership through low fares. DRT pilots in Wales have been successful and are being extended in places to replace fixed route services. Here the long term plan is for bus franchising. Norfolk County Council has combined DRT with school transport for many years and is evaluating a pilot using app based booking. Hertfordshire County Council is applying lessons from a successful semi-flexible digital DRT scheme to introduce digital DRT to in-house dial-a-ride and community transport services.

Participants repeatedly asserted that long term public funding is required for public transport to properly meet the needs of rural communities. While profitable routes exist in some rural

¹ Transport East runs the Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence
<https://www.transporteast.org.uk/rural-mobility-centre-of-excellence/>

locations and some authorities are already integrating transport services from different budgets to reduce expenditure, many argued that rural buses will never be commercially viable as a whole.

There was also strong agreement that rural public transport brings wide social, economic and health benefits which are not currently being accounted for. The Department of Health was singled out as a major beneficiary of good quality public transport services.

Geography and demographics favour a 'horses for courses' approach to designing rural bus services. There was debate about demand-responsive transport services; Padam has evidence that free floating DRT schemes are often not optimal and that better ridership and value for money can be achieved by constraining designs in various ways. Roger French said that there are many cases of long standing successful rural bus services, some operated by community transport organisations, which use fixed buses with flexible routing according to demand. There was agreement that people are reassured by certainty and the value of predictable timetables in a rural setting should not be under-estimated.

There is an opportunity for the academic and consultancy sectors to learn from community transport organisations which have been historically poorly understood and under-researched. The best community transport organisations deliver excellent service quality and customer care. These standards are also key to digital DRT schemes, where technical design alone does not guarantee success. The community transport sector is also expert in operating services under both Section 19 and Section 22 Regulations.

The focus of this roundtable discussion was bus services, but rail should not be overlooked. Rail is especially important in Cornwall and in some places existing rail stations could form rural mobility hubs. Leisure and tourism was also touched upon and will be addressed in a future roundtable.