

Rural Transport Learning Network Roundtables 2023-24

Roundtable 2: Mobility hubs 26 September 2023

Summary

This report summarises the second 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 roundtables² 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 in Microsoft Teams and consisted of presentations by speakers followed by questions and discussion, both verbally and via the chat function. One participant emailed their observations in lieu of attending in person. Some of these were included on their behalf by the chair³.

The theme for this roundtable was the future of mobility hubs outside cities. Topics considered were:

- experience in developing mobility hubs, especially outside cities
- lessons from the work so far and future plans
- ways forward for communities, operators and local authorities in developing mobility hubs in areas outside cities.

There were 22 participants. Sectors represented were: sub-national and local government, manufacturing, technology/innovation, transport consultancy, academic research, community group and non-governmental organisations. The meeting heard from five speakers covering diverse approaches to mobility hubs. Participants responded with questions and comments.

1. **Robin Tyne, CoMoUK:** CoMoUK specialises in shared transport and has developed standards, guidance and accreditation for mobility hubs. Hubs in rural areas with dispersed populations face particular challenges but CoMoUK's case studies include successful community-led rural schemes. A new study deploying 'pop-up' hubs around Scotland will develop an understanding of what works best in different settings.
2. Two sub-national transport bodies in England have developed guidance and support for local authorities to create mobility hubs. **Abigail Nichols, England's Economic Heartland,** described EEH's business case guidance, which enables local authority partners to design mobility hubs according to location and make a strong case for

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

² Reports from previous roundtables hosted by the Smart Mobility Unit in 2020 and 2022 are available at the University of Hertfordshire website <https://www.herts.ac.uk/study/schools-of-study/life-and-medical-sciences/business-support-and-consultancy/smart-mobility-unit/Roundtable-research>

³ Also circulated were a report on a University of Hertfordshire Transport Research and Innovation Grant project on the University as a mobility hub, and a link to an issue of "Smart Transport" on mobility hubs: <https://edition.pagesuite-professional.co.uk/html5/reader/stage/default.aspx?localhost=true&pubname=&edid=6690241f-9173-47a1-b25a-715fa00cc887>

funding. **Renee van Baar**, Rural Mobility Lead at Midlands Connect, said that they have developed a mobility hub toolkit and piloted the resulting guidance with two county councils. A competition culminated in a new digital platform for a rural community to share private electric charging points and electric vehicles. Hope Valley Climate Action played a key role in promoting the online platform and training local people to use it.

3. **John Austin**, fellow at the Foundation for Integrated Transport, presented a methodology for finding locations for potential mobility hubs using mapping software. The approach can help select options with a strong sense of place, with services and infrastructure as well as transport links.
4. **Jenny Milne and Matthew Kendrick, Scottish Rural and Islands Transport Community** explained how the SRITC brings rural communities together so they can influence legislation, the development of transport policy and get involved in design and delivery of projects. First-hand experience for policy makers is invaluable for creating buy-in so in-person meetings are held at rural hubs.

Commercial viability was mentioned by most speakers and throughout the discussion. While financial viability can seem like a barrier for mobility hubs in deep rural locations, on closer inspection some community centres are already acting as rural mobility hubs without being flagged as such.

There is a need to find ways to attribute outcomes to mobility hubs, both to make the case for funding but also to learn what works and what doesn't. In rural areas some important outcomes will not be directly financially quantifiable, such as better access to health and education or reduced social isolation.

There was a strong consensus that rural communities are highly diverse and innovative. Successful projects can often be tracked back to key organisations or individuals in the community. Studying who has been instrumental in establishing successful rural mobility projects could be valuable.

The rural mobility hub concept needs to be 'sold' to decision makers and communities alike. CoMoUK and SRITC offer free online and in person forums, meet-ups and 'try-outs' for decision makers. However, more could be done to make the concept more widely understood. Standard signage might also be worth exploring.

Rural areas often suffer from a tension between the transport needs of residents and visitors. European case studies can suggest ways to meet visitors' needs and serve local people. How car parking should be managed was also a topic of discussion.

The meeting touched on various challenges for local government: skills shortages for developing web-based platforms; wasteful competitive bidding for funding; access to revenue funding for sustaining projects in the long term.

To conclude, some priorities for action and future research were noted:

- simple promotion of rural mobility hubs to increase public understanding
- track the outcomes of 'pop-up' mobility hubs
- find ways to attribute impacts and outcomes to mobility hubs
- look at what worked and what didn't work and be honest about failures.