

Future of Rural Transport Policy Position Statement

V7.0 October 23 2023



Context

Facilitating improvements to transport in rural areas is a considerable issue for local authorities and Sub-national Transport Bodies across the UK. This is no different in the south east of England.

For many people living, working, or visiting rural areas, driving may be seen as the only viable option. Delivering attractive alternatives to the private car as well as maintaining rural highways for all road users can be challenging. Without a change in travel patterns, however, we will not tackle climate change nor address equity challenges for rural residents who do not have access to a car.

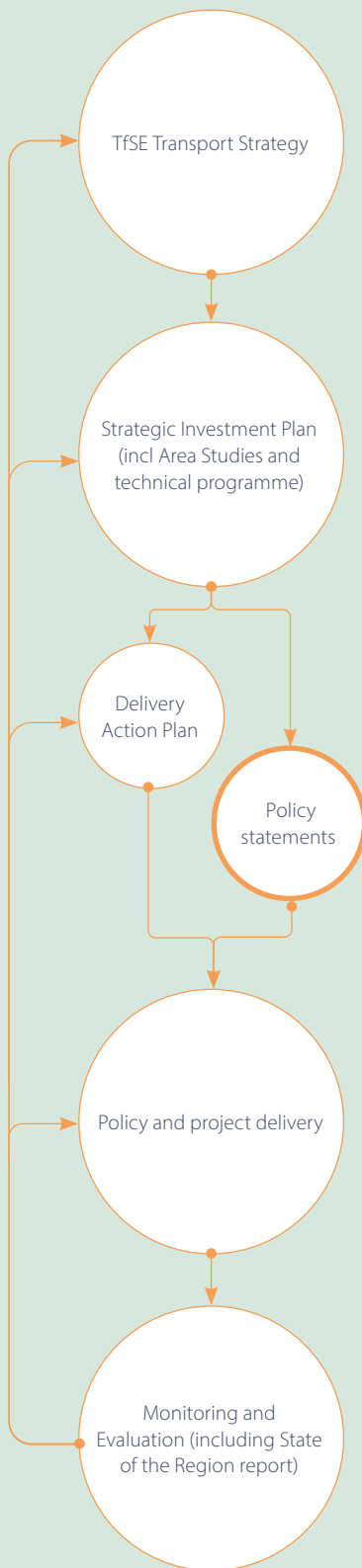
Nonetheless, there are great opportunities to improve transport provision and wider connectivity for rural areas. This can be through increasing the accessibility and connectivity of bus services; development of on-demand transport services and other community transport; enhanced active travel networks and rights of way; as well as improved digital connectivity and remote service provision.

Rural areas exhibit a range of definitions but generally incorporate those outside of settlements with over 10,000 residents. Some larger settlements, known as hub towns (between 10,000 and 30,000) serve wider rural hinterlands.

England's population living in rural areas has increased since 2011 from 9.3 to 9.7 million, with most living in rural towns, villages and hamlets and their fringes. This illustrates the need for effective intervention in dispersed areas, alongside hamlets, villages, and smaller towns.



Transport for the South East



We need an approach suited to the south east to address the challenges of rural transport and ensure that no part of the south east is left without access to safe, amenable, and affordable public & active travel networks. Without intervention, those living and working in rural areas will become more car dependent, impacting villages and towns, and reducing the south east’s ability to decarbonise effectively.

Doing nothing is not an option and “business as usual” will not work either. The goals we seek require an integrated, multi-modal approach that makes best use of what we already have.

Our **Transport Strategy**, published in 2020, sets out how we will tackle these challenges and achieve our goals. In the Transport Strategy, we set out the following vision for 2050:

By 2050, the south east of England will be a leading global region for net zero carbon, sustainable economic growth where integrated transport, digital and energy networks have delivered a step change in connectivity and environmental quality. A high-quality, reliable, safe and accessible transport network will offer seamless door-to-door journeys enabling our businesses to compete and trade more effectively in the global marketplace and giving our residents and visitors the highest quality of life.

To support our vision, Transport for the South East submitted a **Strategic Investment Plan** to government in 2023. We have engaged widely with stakeholders to ensure what we put forward in the plan aligns with both their needs and their expectations in a sustainable and financially responsible manner. It is a plan developed by the south east, for the south east.

What we're going to do to deliver our 2050 vision



We will continue to work with local transport authorities as well as planning authorities, statutory bodies, and communities to deliver the interventions and infrastructure improvements within rural areas identified in the Strategic Investment Plan. Priorities to achieve this vision will include improving public transport & active travel service provision and reducing car-dependency.

Our role will focus on advocacy and promotion, guidance, and policy development, and collaboration and engagement.

Advocate for enhanced rural transport connectivity

To make effective, targeted improvements to rural transport in the south east, there is an integral need to engage stakeholders across the region regarding the challenges of rural transport. This will include presenting specifically at forums focussed both on the south east but also those neighbouring.



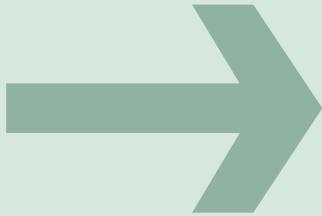
Action 1 – Continue to advocate for enhanced rural transport connectivity

Continue to advocate for enhanced rural transport connectivity through our Future Mobility Forum and cross Sub-national Transport Body forums and extend the discussion to other existing forums where appropriate.

Developing a robust evidence base and effective strategy for rural transport

For many, the south east is characterised by its substantial areas of rural and dispersed communities. Many of these communities' exhibit transport accessibility challenges. TfSE's Transport Strategy and Strategic Investment Plan and supporting analysis evidence these challenges.

Now, there is a need to build on this, develop additional insight regarding rural and dispersed mobility in the south east and support constituent local transport and planning authorities with evidence to support their Local Transport Plans and Local Plans respectively.



Action 2 – Develop a rural and dispersed community-specific evidence base

Develop a rural and dispersed community-specific evidence base, incorporating insights developed for existing strategies and plans, alongside new insight.

Improving rural public transport

Bus services often top the agenda for stakeholders who are involved in rural transport, and for good reason. The reduction in service frequency, or the complete removal of service from rural areas, can be devastating to residents, particularly those without access to a car. This can increase social exclusion from wider society.

However, rural bus services have continued to be cut by local authorities struggling to afford the extensive subsidies often required to maintain them. Other funding mechanisms are available that could help maintain these services such as through Bus Service Improvement Plans and developer contributions. Interventions generally benefitting bus services are likely to benefit those operating in rural contexts, including priority infrastructure such as bus land and bus gates in urban contexts which could have knock-on improvements on reliability and efficiency.





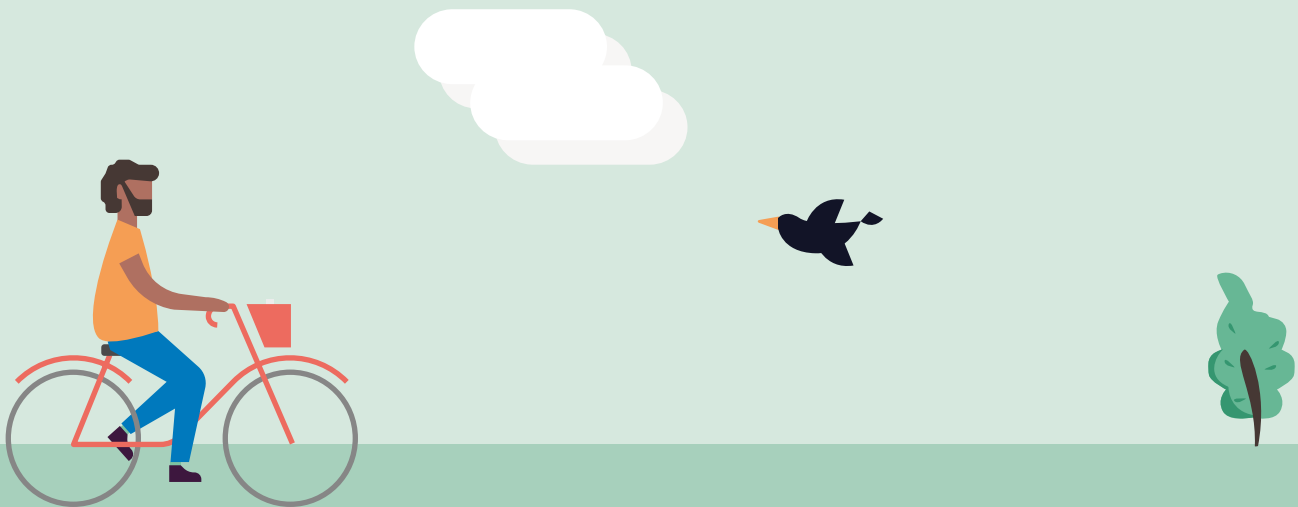
Action 3 – Develop a local bus service evidence base

Work with local authorities to develop a regional evidence base regarding the loss of rural bus services, identify where pockets of poor bus accessibility exist, and develop alternatives.

Enabling demand-responsive transport

Demand-responsive transport trials have recently been undertaken across the UK, including urban, suburban, rural, and dispersed contexts. In general, the trials have demonstrated that these services are more effective within rural and dispersed contexts in comparison to urban areas.

They have also identified the benefits these services bring both to operators and users through their flexible nature, and the improved customer experience in comparison to traditional fixed-route bus services. However, there are number of challenges regarding digital inclusion for booking travel which does require effective mitigation (e.g. phone lines to book travel).





Action 4 – Review and facilitate demand-responsive transport trials

Review current demand-responsive transport trials which have been delivered elsewhere in the UK. Support Local Transport Authorities in planning and delivering trials, incorporating guidance delivered through the Rural Centre of Excellence (RCoE).

Facilitating mobility hub development

There is an opportunity to implement mobility hub principles into public transport improvements, particularly within small market towns and villages, alongside tourism destinations where viability is increased. These mobility hubs, in rural contexts, should look to integrate with the town/village hub, and specifically integrate bus services with car share vehicles, cycle parking and electric vehicle charging facilities. Furthermore, hubs should look to provide good interchange facilities and high-quality service information.



Action 5 – Review mobility hub guidance

Review existing guidance on the planning, design and delivery of mobility hubs including examples of best practice to provide to local authorities. This should incorporate guidance delivered through the Rural Centre of Excellence (RCoE).



Developing accessible active travel networks

Rural and dispersed communities have significant accessibility challenges regarding walking and cycling networks in comparison to those in urban environments. Additionally, increased distances between points of interest within rural areas, alongside challenging landscapes may make active travel less amenable for many. Notwithstanding this, there may be opportunities in some areas, particularly around the south east's existing National Cycle Network.

Villages often lack safe and lit pavements and public rights of way networks, reducing road safety and facilitating car dependency. Rights of Way Improvement Plans (ROWIPs) and Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans (LCWIPs) aim to tackle these challenges, which are used strategically to improve the quality of networks.



Action 6 – Support improvements to local walking and cycling networks

Support authorities to improve the quality of walking and cycling networks, through advocating for funding to deliver these improvements and facilitating authorities in updating LCWIPs and ROWIPs, as well as local transport plans.



Next steps

Reflecting our status as the Sub-national Transport Body for the south east we will work with our delivery partners and other stakeholders to implement the actions included in this policy position statement. We will tailor our approach to the mode, scale, and level of development of each prioritised intervention.

We will use our Monitoring and Evaluation Framework to report our progress against these actions on an annual basis.

Contact us

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