

Rural Transport Learning Network Roundtables 2024-5

Introduction

For some years now the University of Hertfordshire Smart Mobility Unit (SMU) has been running a set of roundtables, looking at transport outside cities and rural transport. Rural transport has not had the same focus as transport in cities and towns but is nonetheless vital for the many people who live and work in rural areas. The roundtables have been supported by the Department for Transport; more recently they have formed part of the Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence run by Transport East, as the lead sub-national transport body in England on rural transport.¹

The roundtables have brought together a wide range of groups and people active on rural transport, including local authorities, sub-national transport bodies, entrepreneurs, academics, consultants, NGOs and central government. As with previous ones, this series has revealed a lot of really interesting projects providing services and tools for improving transport in rural areas, and suggestions for new ideas and approaches to taking these improvements further.

These roundtables dealt with four distinct areas:

- Roundtable 1 focused on the impact of net zero policies on transport in rural areas, and the need for a “just transition”. The presentations and discussion included concerns about the impacts but also practical suggestions, backed by opinion polling, on ways forward.
- Roundtable 2 looked at tourism and visitor travel in rural areas. Leisure travel is the biggest single reason for car travel, and areas like the Lake District face significant issues in managing car traffic at peak times. The roundtable heard from organisations finding new ways to address this, including Good Journey², Low Carbon Destinations and Sustrans (now the Walk Wheel Cycle Trust). A key finding from these groups is that improving non-car access to leisure attractions and the countryside is important for widening access for those without cars as well as for reducing traffic and its impacts in rural areas
- Roundtable 3 looked at collaborations between the public and private sectors on rural transport. This showcased businesses and entrepreneurs providing services in rural areas, and the potential for these to scale further. A key feature of these (and projects highlighted in other roundtables) was the use of data to provide services to employers and others – Mobilityways³ and RideTandem use anonymised employee data to offer plans (and in RideTandem’s case transport shuttle services) to improve commuting and widen labour markets in rural areas. These approaches are sometimes not understood by those in the public sector and the roundtable made the case for better engagement.
- Roundtable 4 covered the Government’s bus services reforms and whether franchising of bus services can work in rural areas. The roundtable included cases where franchising might help wider objectives including a “bus boost” scheme to deliver good bus services for new housing, a “mini-Switzerland” project in the Peak District to improve bus-rail integration⁴, and better public transport in Lake District valleys. It heard from local authorities in Cambridgeshire and the South West about their achievements and plans for better buses.

Several other projects were featured in the roundtables and also in a symposium that we ran to inform the Department for Transport’s integrated transport strategy, the new Better Connected transport Plan: the Derwent Valley Car Club (which has developed a “car club in a box” scheme to support insurance etc for such projects)⁵; Home Run, which helps schools and councils to use data to give

¹ The accounts from those round tables are on the SMU website

<https://www.herts.ac.uk/study/schools-of-study/life-and-medical-sciences/business-support-and-consultancy/smart-mobility-unit/Roundtable-research> The latest sets are on the Transport East website <https://www.transporteast.gov.uk/rural-networking-partnership/>

² <https://www.goodjourney.org.uk/>; <https://lowcarbondestinations.org/> <https://www.walkwheelcycletrust.org.uk/>

³ <https://mobilityways.com/how-tech-can-improve-green-rural-commuting/>; <https://www.ridetandem.com/>

⁴ <https://hopevalleyclimateaction.org.uk/plans-published-for-mini-switzerland-a-national-demonstrator-to-transform-rural-public-transport/>

⁵ <https://www.ourgateshead.org/derwent-valley-car-club/>; <https://ecocarclub.org/>

students and parents better travel options⁶ and Sustainable Integrated Transport for Ullswater (SITU)⁷, where businesses and residents have come together to provide practical alternatives for car travel in the Ullswater Valley.

Together, the roundtables have shown that there can be practical alternatives to car travel in rural areas, and that these can benefit residents, communities and businesses. New Government legislation, such as bus franchising, can offer new approaches for rural areas. It is hoped that other rural communities and councils will find the roundtable outputs and links useful in addressing transport issues in their areas.

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⁶ <https://www.homerun-app.com/>

⁷ <https://situcumbria.org.uk/>