



<b>Committee</b>	Overview & Scrutiny Committee
<b>Date</b>	18/04/2024
<b>Subject</b>	REVIEW OF RURAL TRANSPORT SERVICES IN EAST SUFFOLK
<b>Cabinet Member</b>	Cllr Toby Hammond, the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Economic Development and Transport
<b>Report Author(s)</b>	<p>Luke Bennett Partnerships Manager <a href="mailto:Luke.bennett@eastsoffolk.gov.uk">Luke.bennett@eastsoffolk.gov.uk</a></p> <p>Simon Barnett Integrated Transport &amp; Enhanced Partnership Manager Passenger Transport, Suffolk County Council <a href="mailto:Simon.Barnett@suffolk.gov.uk">Simon.Barnett@suffolk.gov.uk</a></p> <p>Sharon Payne Regional Rural Transport Lead Transport East <a href="mailto:Sharon.Payne@transporteast.gov.uk">Sharon.Payne@transporteast.gov.uk</a></p>
<b>Head of Service</b>	<p>Nicole Rickard Head of Communities &amp; Leisure <a href="mailto:Nicole.rickard@eastsoffolk.gov.uk">Nicole.rickard@eastsoffolk.gov.uk</a></p>
<b>Director</b>	<p>Nick Khan Strategic Director <a href="mailto:Nick.khan@eastsoffolk.gov.uk">Nick.khan@eastsoffolk.gov.uk</a></p>

Key Decision?	No
Is the report Open or Exempt?	OPEN

## Purpose/Summary

In accordance with the review scoping document, this report is intended to provide information to assist the committee:

- i) to understand and, if possible, improve the rural transport offer across East Suffolk, particularly for disabled residents.
- ii) Make recommendations to ensure that as much transport provision as possible is delivered in rural areas across the district.

## Recommendation(s)

That Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

1. Consider the contents of the report as part of its review.

## Strategic plan

How does this proposal support Our Direction 2028?

<b>Environmental Impact</b>	“Supporting sustainable travel - enabling people to use public transport and travel in an environmentally sustainable way” – by reducing emissions caused by single occupancy car journeys and connecting to active travel walking, wheeling and cycling.
<b>Sustainable Housing</b>	“Promote housing developments which enhance wellbeing and protect the environment” – by encouraging sustainable transport where possible.
<b>Tackling Inequalities</b>	“Using local data to design and deliver services – ensuring that we adapt the design and delivery of the services accordingly to support communities and individuals appropriately.” “Reduce health inequality and improve wellbeing” - through access to health services and social activities.
<b>Thriving Economy</b>	“Empower residents to build the right career skills” – through access to education, training and employment.
<b>Our Foundations / governance of the organisation</b>	“We will use digital technology to ensure our services are efficient, secure and data led” – through the development of a transport mobile app.

## Justification for recommendations

### 1. Background

- 1.1. The value of rural transport is far greater than the fares generated:
  - i) The Social benefits (access to education, employment, health services, social activities etc)
  - ii) Environmental benefits (reduce emissions caused by single occupancy car journeys etc)
  - iii) Health benefits of active travel (walking, wheeling and cycling)
  - iv) Support for other services (reducing the number of cancelled health appointments, lowering the amount of home visits required by health workers or hospital, social care or school transport, providing mobility to escape domestic violence, etc).
- 1.2. Commercial transport providers are finding it difficult to make a business case stack up financially in our more rural areas – creating what Transport East calls “Transport Deserts.”
- 1.3. Community transport providers fill the gap and can act flexibly to meet the demands of rural communities. They are generally not-for-profit organisations reliant on grant funding and subsidies, and Suffolk has traditionally received poor levels of government transport funding resulting in a gradual decline in bus transport.
- 1.4. Current thinking is that communities can take some ownership of the transport services they need and help make them a success. This has been the focus of the East Suffolk Pilot Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) services and been achieved by working closely with the Community Partnerships whose communities they serve.
- 1.5. District Councils are increasingly taking an active role in transport, as they understand in detail the challenges that arise at a local level, and those transport solutions that will support wider social, economic and environmental outcomes. A key challenge to success will be the need for increased integration of the roles and responsibilities at different tiers of government to create change and deliver sustainable transport outcomes.
- 1.6. It is challenging for Local Authorities to identify the social value of rural transport, but a workshop hosted by Transport East in 2023 found that all those attending see the benefit of being able to identify this for business case development and funding bids. In many cases, the social value outputs are attained over many years and Transport East has included a recommendation in its recent report for Government to review how rural transport is assessed (see background papers).

### 2. Basic scoping information required

#### 2.1 Legislation / National Policies

- 2.1.1 The only statutory requirement for provision of transport in any form falls on Suffolk County Council (SCC) as the Education Authority to provide home to school transport for

those entitled to it. This is either due to the distance to their nearest suitable school or where walking routes are deemed unsafe. Such services can be operated with buses that in some instances are open for public use, or by SCC purchasing tickets on existing bus routes that happen to run to schools at suitable times. Beyond this, there is no requirement for any branch of Government to provide bus services.

2.1.2 Currently, most bus services in England are operated under the provisions of the 1985 Transport Act, which deregulated and commercialised the industry. Essentially, anybody in possession of the relevant qualifications can obtain an Operator's Licence and then run buses on a commercial basis simply by registering their intent to do so with the office of the Traffic Commissioner. Such services are funded entirely from fares income, receiving no subsidy from SCC other than reimbursement of revenue foregone by participating in the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme.

2.1.3 The registration process operates on a 70-day timescale, whereby the Local Transport Authority (LTA) - in this case SCC, has 28 days to consider the impact of the proposal on the local network and the 42 days for the Traffic Commissioner to actually approve the route/change. Although SCC is consulted, it has no power to approve or deny services nor any power to impose conditions or requirements on operators.

2.1.4 Where bus services are not provided commercially, the LTA has the power to contract routes to fill gaps – generally through competitive tendering but direct awards are also allowed in some circumstances. The budget available for local bus contracts at SCC was reduced in 2019 and is currently around £1.5m, of which £600,000 is an annual government grant.

## 2.2 **Where the Council is working in partnership with another stakeholder/body**

2.2.1 Prior to 2020 the Council had no experience of operating transport services and, through its Community Partnerships, has since taken the opportunity to explore what is possible to meet the needs of the rural population in East Suffolk. As a result, the Council is now delivering limited services for its residents in certain parts of the district and East Suffolk is becoming recognised as a front runner amongst Suffolk's District Councils for its work on transport.

2.2.2 When the Community Partnerships were launched a series of stakeholder workshops held during October/November 2019 identified at least one aspect of travel as a priority for action in all but one of the eight partnership areas. Each workshop was focused on a tailored data pack and the priorities were derived from both the data presented and from intelligence about local need.

2.2.3 In response, the Community Partnership Board set up a multi-agency transport and travel task group in September 2020. Membership of the group included East Suffolk Council, Transport East, Suffolk County Council, Community Action Suffolk, Suffolk Association of Local Councils and EDF.

2.2.4 The group engaged an analyst / project manager who undertook research and completed a project assessment against a set of economic / social / environmental criteria. As a result, the group has focussed on:

**Demand Responsive Travel (DRT):** The task group developed two pilot DRT projects to test more sustainable operating models. These are called Buzzabout and Katch (see para v and vi below).

**Mobile App:** A low-cost pre-existing community transport app named Flexiroute 365 has been trialled alongside the Katch service. This has had limited success but provided invaluable evidence of what functionality is required. The Council led a piece of work with other districts to fund and develop a bespoke Suffolk-wide transport app to increase the accessibility of the services and to attract the untapped demand believed to be out there.

**Active Travel:** Rather than delivering a specific project, the task group has supported East Suffolk Council to engage with communities to develop its cycling and walking strategy.

### 2.3 Resources available e.g. staff / budgets

- 2.3.1 The Council currently has an Energy Projects Transport lead working mainly on Sizewell C related transport matters.
- 2.3.2 Officers within the Planning service led on the preparation of the Cycling and Walking Strategy and are currently involved in taking forward its implementation through the Council's Cycling, Walking and Wheeling Working Group, in addition to improvements being sought through the consideration of planning applications. It is recognised that additional resource will be needed in the Council to take forward project delivery.
- 2.3.3 The budget for a new project manager role has been secured for the next financial year to allow for the management and promotion of sustainable travel in the district, including community transport, if relevant. The recruitment process has been initiated and it is anticipated that the post will be filled in the next few months.
- 2.3.4 The council does not have a specific transport budget but is able to draw upon funds allocated for the Council's Strategic Plan priorities and potentially from the Community Partnership Board, which has a set budget allocation each year including for its transport priority.
- 2.3.5 The Council will actively pursue appropriate external funding opportunities such as BSIP2 (Bus Service Improvement Plan) and has in the past received payments in kind, in the way of officer resource from external partners to assist with its transport ambitions.

### 2.4 What other Local Authorities are doing?

- 2.4.1 Transport East report that, across the region and beyond, funding for local public transport is variable. Through the National Bus Strategy 'Bus Back Better', the Government aims to reverse the decline in bus use "We want to ensure that the needs of rural transport users are given equal consideration to those in urban areas. We have piloted projects targeting rural areas specifically. We are committed to improving the connectivity of isolated rural communities and those with infrequent and unreliable services. We want improved rural transport to support economic growth and development in rural communities".

- 2.4.2 Since 2021 funding has been allocated through a number of streams, Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP), BSIP2, Zero Emission Bus Regional Areas (ZEBRA) 1, ZEBRA 2, the £2 bus fare cap, Rural Mobility Fund. Not all authorities have received funding from these streams, with £/head of population varying across the country. For example, Suffolk has received £5.16/head whereas North Lincolnshire received £12.30/head. (Source; Campaign for Better Transport).
- 2.4.3 In the Transport East region, both Norfolk and Essex were successful in securing funding via the Rural Mobility Fund (£700,000 and £2.575M respectively). 17 pilots are being funded from a total allocation of just under £20M to trial on-demand bus services in rural or suburban areas.
- 2.4.4 Department for Transport (DfT) has also committed to £3M of funding for rural innovation through the Future of Mobility, Rural Transport paper. This is being allocated via competitive bidding processes with the Connected Places Catapult (£1M Rural Accelerator Fund) and Innovate UK (£2M with £1M ringfenced for rural applications Rural Decarbonisation Demonstrators pilots).
- 2.4.5 Elsewhere in Suffolk, Babergh District Council is supporting local community transport operators to decarbonise their fleet by providing match funding for an electric minibus, and donating an EV charge point to a Sudbury-based operator, and is helping a collective of parishes in the Brett Valley to develop a new DDRT (Digital Demand Responsive Transport) service that has been allocated funding from Suffolk's Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP2) funding. Mid Suffolk District Council is investing £600,000 into new community transport or demand responsive transport provisions across the district via a Rural Transport Grants Scheme (currently open to all types of transport provider, with a closing date of Monday 15th April), and has match funded SCC investment into a 'ChatAboard bus' community transport service being developed and delivered by Communities Together East Anglia.

### **3. Answers to Scrutiny Committee questions**

#### **3.1. What rural transport services does the County Council and District provide, how are they funded and how well used are they?**

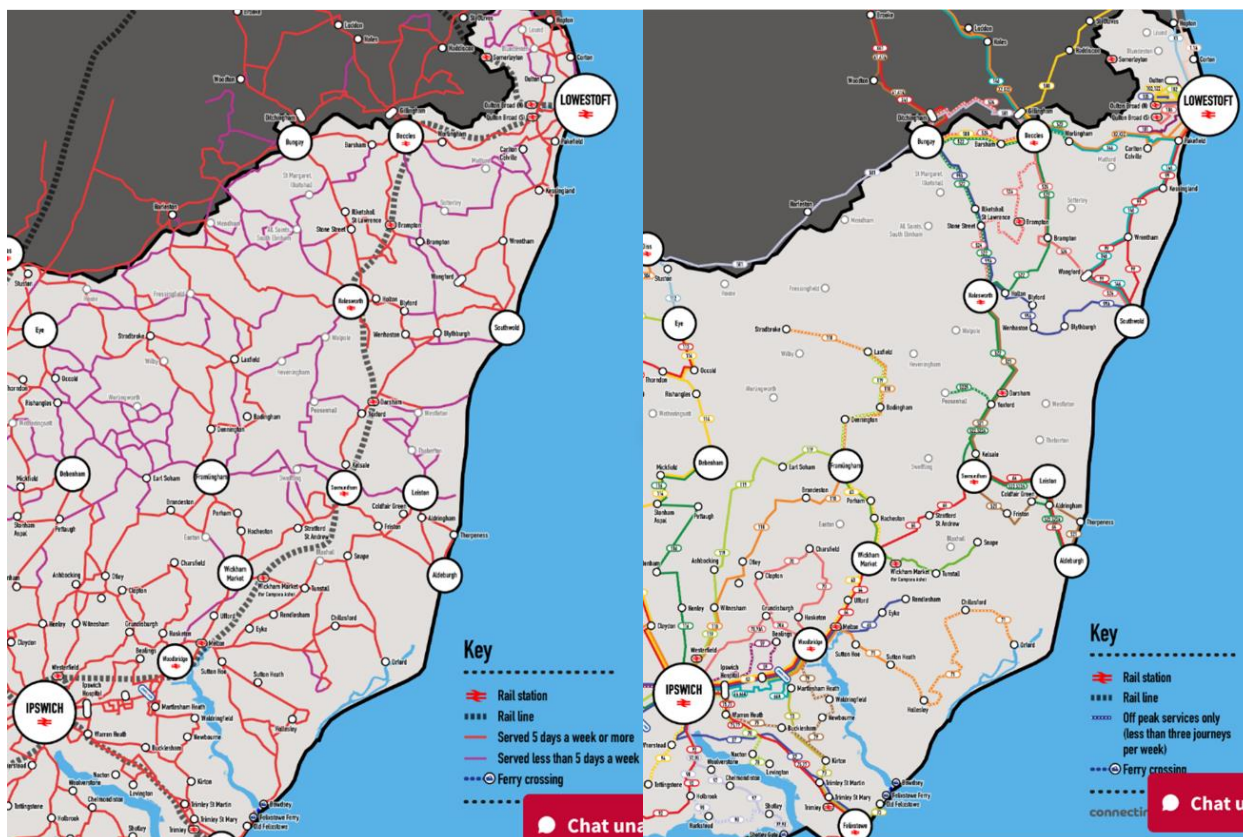
##### **Suffolk County Council (SCC):**

##### **3.1.1 Rail:**

- i) The East Suffolk and Felixstowe branch lines link much of the area with Ipswich from where connections are available to London and the rest of the country. There is also the line from Lowestoft to Norwich. SCC works with both Greater Anglia and Network Rail to deliver strategic objectives relating to rail on both the local and national levels. SCC hosts the budget for the East Suffolk Lines Community Rail Partnership (ESLCRP). Although funded by the ESLCRP, SCC also hosts the Community Rail Partnership officer within the Integrated Transport team of the Passenger Transport Team.

### 3.1.2 Bus:

- i) The current bus network in Suffolk sees the commercial operators tending to focus on inter-urban routes and limited town services and SCC filling in where possible. Use of bus services has been declining nationally for at least 10 years, reducing the fares income and leading to operators withdrawing services that are no longer commercially viable. This is illustrated clearly by comparing the network in 1998 with the position now:



Large parts of the county are now left with no scheduled services, with the impact being felt most in the more rural areas.

- ii) The bus industry was particularly hard hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw bus use drop by up to 90% in most cases. The Government provided significant support funding to keep routes operating during this period - SCC was responsible for distributing over £5m of this funding to our operators. Since then, ridership has still not fully returned to the levels seen in 2019. Whilst most fare-paying passengers have returned, the increase in working from home and growth of online shopping has changed travel patterns for many. Furthermore, use of buses by Concessionary Pass holders is still depressed, at around 65-70% of pre-Covid use. All of this means that many services still require funding support to remain in operation.
- iii) Concessionary fare reimbursement has been kept at 96% of pre-Covid levels despite people not travelling, although this will be reducing from April 2024.
- iv) SCC is also using the last of the Covid support grants to help preserve First services in East Suffolk (including the Ipswich Park & Ride services) which would otherwise have to be reduced in frequency or withdrawn.

- v) Driver shortages have been particularly acute in rural areas, with several services in Suffolk having to be reduced in frequency during the last few years. All operators have seen their costs increase significantly since 2020, particularly in relation to fuel and driver wages. This has helped reduce the driver deficit, but the overall increase contributes to making some routes less viable.
- vi) Having managed to keep a stable supported service network since the last budget reduction in 2019, SCC has been forced to withdraw some supported journeys in April 2024 purely to keep others operating due to increased contract demands from the operators.

### 3.1.3 **Community Transport:**

- i) Generally operated by charitable organisations using minibuses and community cars, there are multiple community transport operators in Suffolk. They have a mix of paid and volunteer drivers and provide door to door transport for those unable to access regular buses – either through physical disability/infirmity or where there is no scheduled bus available.
- ii) SCC formerly provided grant funding to a range of providers in this field, but this left gaps in provision so a new direction for funding was launched in 2017. The Connecting Communities contracts cover the entire county, based on the old district/borough boundaries and are open to all on the same basis of being unable to access a scheduled bus service. Where possible the services will take people from home to connect with regular buses for onward travel, but door to door transport is also possible. These contracts have been extended up to March 2026 at a cost of £1.3m per year. The services provided under these contracts must be pre-booked, so can be less convenient than using a timetabled route, but they will try to offer transport at the required time and are much more flexible than traditional weekly shopping services for example.
- iii) Many of the former organisations in receipt of SCC grant funding are still in operation, deriving their income from fares and other sources, meaning parts of the county have more than one option when it comes to community transport.
- iv) The community transport sector has seen worse driver shortages than the commercial operators. As smaller, usually charitable, bodies they are unable to increase wages for paid drivers to the same degree. They also struggle to recruit volunteer drivers – partly through the costs involved in training for those who do not have an automatic minibus qualification on their driving licence (i.e. those who passed their test since the mid-1990s) – but also the increased regulation of the industry requiring higher standards.

## **East Suffolk Council**

### 3.1.4 **Demand Responsive Transport (DRT)**

- i) Contracts exist between the Council and operators for the Buzzabout and Katch DRT.
- ii) **Buzzabout:**  
Buzzabout is operated by BACT. This pilot service operates on an area-based model and provides a demand responsive 16-seater branded minibus service to meet the identified



needs of the communities in and around Lound, Blundeston, Somerleyton, Gunton St Peters and the north of Lowestoft. These needs include better transport to access services and social activities and tackling high levels of rural isolation and loneliness in the area.

The service operates between 08:30 and 16:30 on Tuesdays and Thursdays, allows passengers to book their journey by phone or online up to two weeks in advance and takes passengers exactly where they need to go within the service area at the time they need to travel.

Passengers can use Buzzabout to connect to scheduled bus services and Lowestoft or Somerleyton railway station to facilitate onward journeys – for example to James Paget Hospital or Great Yarmouth. Since it launched on 4 July 2022 the service has provided 1299 passenger journeys and shown an upward trend in journeys that are forecast to further increase. The service is fully accessible to wheelchair users.

iii) **Katch:**

Katch is operated by CATS. This pilot operates on a route-based model and provides a demand responsive 13-seater branded minibus service to meet the identified needs of residents and visitors in the Framlingham, Wickham Market, Campsea Ashe, Snape areas. These needs include better access to services and the need to tackle high levels of social isolation and loneliness, and access to onward journeys by bus, taxi or train from the railway station at Campsea Ashe.

The service operates six days a week; 07:30 - 18:30 Monday to Friday, 10:00 - 18:30 Saturdays, and bank holidays 10:00 – 18:00. The service is fully accessible to wheelchair users.

Since its launch on 11 April 2023 the service has provided 2790 passenger journeys and shown an upward trend in passenger journeys that are forecast to increase further. The service is fully accessible to wheelchair users.

iv) **The mobile app:**

Flexiroute 365 mobile application was trialled on the Katch Service but amendments to the app are required which cannot be implemented by the app developer in an acceptable timescale so this contract has been cancelled.

v) The Council, with its partners, is open to exploring the possibility of a mobile transport app. This will be dependent on what the appetite is for future transport provision and whether it is possible to work on a pan-Suffolk (or even beyond) basis.

3.2. **Are there any specific service/arrangements made for disabled people?**

3.2.1 Legislation from the former Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and now the Equality Act 2010 has done much to make transport services more accessible for those with disabilities. Since 2018 all buses in use on local bus services have been required to have step-free entry to as many seats as possible plus wheelchair spaces and suitable grab rails etc. Many buses are now equipped with interior visual displays and audio announcements of the route and next stop details. This will be required on all new buses in the coming years.

3.2.2 The bus stop environment should also assist in making services accessible. Where possible stops should have a level paved area with suitable ramps/dropped kerbs to enable people to reach them from adjoining footways or by crossing the road. Since the 1990s SCC has added raised kerb height areas at bus stops to make boarding and alighting from buses easier and meaning buses do not have to lower their suspension to give level access from the stop. Funding for such works tends to be sporadic, drawn largely from developer contributions, and to date only around 30% of active bus stops have been improved. Other stop enhancements to increase accessibility such as installation of bus shelters, seating and real time display screens is also limited in scope at present due both to funding and there being suitable space at stops.

3.2.3 As such, the best way to guarantee that a journey can be made by those with physical impairments is through the Connecting Communities services.

### 3.3. **How do we engage with the Disability Forum for Suffolk to better understand public transport user needs**

3.3.1 East Suffolk is covered by two Disability Forums – Suffolk Coastal and Waveney. Transport issues are often discussed at Forum meetings as part of the consideration of how easy it is for those with disabilities to access specific services, particularly in rural areas.

3.3.2 The Council also funds (and has recently doubled its funding for) our two Disability Advice Services. Both Disability Advice Services promote the services offered by CATS and BACT to people with disabilities as well as the Connected Communities offer provided by SCC.

### 3.4. **How do we work with East Suffolk Travel Association (Lowestoft to Ipswich rail line area) and East Suffolk Lines Community Rail Partnership to ensure greater integrated public transport in our rural rail stations and bus networks, and greater publicity of such services?**

3.4.1 East Suffolk Lines Community Rail Partnership have details about Katch on the "Next station" information on the onboard screens as trains near Wickham Market station. A tannoy advert about Katch is being considered too. Posters advertising the Katch service are to be found in each of the railway stations along the East Suffolk Line and in large connecting stations such as Colchester, Chelmsford and London Liverpool Street. Katch is further advertised in the timetable booklet and promoted on the 'Suffolk On Board' website.

3.4.2 SCC members tend to meet with East Suffolk Travel Association at least annually to discuss their ambitions for travel in the County.

### 3.5. **How will the Suffolk Bus Service Improvement Plan £3.6 million settlement be used to support our district's rural services?**

3.5.1 Under the Government's Bus Back Better national strategy, SCC was required to implement an Enhanced Bus Partnership (EP) for the County and publish a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP). Membership of the EP enables the council and bus companies to qualify for any future government funding made available for local bus services. The BSIP sets out the aims of the EP and acts as the bidding document for such funds.

3.5.2 The initial BSIP sought funding of £77m over three years (£106m over five years) to improve service levels/frequencies and deliver bus priority measures, ticketing schemes and enhanced bus stop infrastructure. Sadly, this funding was not awarded by the Department for Transport (a total of 78 LTAs were able to bid, with the total requested coming in at over £7.7bn against a fund of £1.5bn).

However, the government recognised that the authorities not in receipt of initial funding were still ambitious to improve services so further smaller grants were awarded. SCC has received £1.8m for 2023/24 and is scheduled to receive the same amount for 2024/25 pending submission of an updated BSIP in June.

3.5.3 The year 1 allocation has been divided as shown below:

- i) Direct grants to operators to maintain the current network: £460,000
- ii) Design work on bus priority schemes: £150,000
- iii) New and enhanced services across Suffolk: £1.2m

All parishes, districts and operators were invited to submit ideas for use of the funding to improve services, with over 65 being received. 10 schemes have received funding, those in East Suffolk are increasing the frequency of service 521 between Aldeburgh, Saxmundham and Halesworth and extending the existing Buzzabout pilot scheme serving villages north of Lowestoft.

### 3.6. **How does public transport for new developments in rural areas get built into the system?**

3.6.1 SCC is consulted on major planning applications, and they will identify where funding should be sought through Section 106 obligations to improve local bus stops/services where directly related and relevant to the development. This generally tends to be funding toward bus stop improvements – inclusive of better-quality built shelters and also digital signage etc. Requests are generally in regard to bus stops proximate to the development site. Section 106 obligations are also often sought in relation to school transport linked to the likely increased requirement arising from the development. Timescales for this are generally tight, and SCC report that this does not usually permit suitable discussions with the bus companies and affected parishes before submission. However, parishes are consulted through the application and sometimes by the developer at pre-application community consultation stage. Determination of applications is carried out by East Suffolk Council, and Planning officers report that when SCC recommend Section 106 obligations towards improving bus stops or funding towards school transport, then these are nearly always carried through.

3.6.2 In terms of bus service provision, new or expanded services are often sought/encouraged as part of strategic developments. Given that strategic sites have longer lead-in times for submission, initial engagement with bus service providers and the feasibility of a new route/expanded service can be explored as part of the pre-application engagement. If a bus service is feasible, developers are typically required to subsidise the service for an initial period until there are sufficient occupations to sustain it.

3.6.3 The masterplanning process for strategic sites also seeks to ensure that the proposed developments incorporate a road hierarchy/network which is futureproofed/capable of accommodating buses etc, usually through a spine road.

3.7. **How do we, as ESC, work to expand more community transport models such as BACT etc?**

Decision Made by the individual Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Transport published 26 February 2024:

1. That the Katch DRT pilot be extended until 31 April 2025. This will require Council expenditure of £90k.
2. That the Buzzabout DRT pilots be extended until 31 March 2026. This will not require additional funding [due to the contribution from Suffolk's BSIP grant].
3. That authority be delegated to the Strategic Director, in consultation with the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Economic Development and Transport, to oversee a process to reprocure both Buzzabout and Katch separately, and to award the contract to the preferred bidder in each case.
4. That a mechanism be established for Members to develop a long-term strategy for transport in East Suffolk, working alongside key stakeholders such as Suffolk County Council and Transport East and with the option to commission expert advice. A Decision could then be made about the viability of the Council operating transport services thereafter.

Reason for Decision: The work on transport and travel pioneered by the Community Partnership Board is an important first step to identifying what sustainable transport, as identified as a priority in our direction 2028, could look like. The decision offers the Council a chance to fully benefit from the work already underway and learn what level of subsidy is likely to be required to provide a sustainable model for DRT services. It also gives time to commission expert advice on the best long-term strategy for transport in East Suffolk.

3.8. **How do we make use of support and guidance through the Rural Services Network?**

3.8.1 Transport East (TE) has engaged directly with the Rural Services Network (RSN) and disseminates information from them via the TE newsletter. The RSN campaigns and advocates for rural authorities, through its general activities such as webinars, member services and guidance, as well as policy recommendations to central government. The RSN also undertakes secretariat duties for the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Rural Services. A cross-party group of MP's from rural constituencies that come together to promote debate on the provision of rural services and to issue recommendations and reports.

4. **Financial Implications**

4.1. Total cost to extend Buzzabout after 31 August 2024 until 31 March 2026 is a maximum of £80,000. This includes running costs, a reserve to repay the operator for accepting concessionary passes and a marketing budget. These costs will be met by i) £61,484 BSIP2 grant from Suffolk County Council and ii) £18,000 match funding from the Community Partnership Board.

- 4.2. Total cost to extend Katch from 11 April 2024 until 31 April 2025 is a maximum of £90,000, subject to procurement. This includes running costs and does not include provision for concessionary passes. The cost of marketing would be covered separately by the Community Partnership Board. We would also expect to receive some money back from the operator as passenger journeys increase.
- 4.3. The budget for a new East Suffolk Council project manager role has already been secured for the next financial year to allow for the management of travel in the district, including community transport, if relevant and Cabinet agree that an ongoing role in relation to community transport is part of their wider ambitions around Tackling Inequalities.
- 4.4. There are currently no direct financial implications of the issues set out in this paper.

## **5. Legal Implications**

- 5.1. The Department for Transport defines a scheduled local bus service (a regular service which includes special regular services) as a service that provides for the carriage of passengers at specified intervals along a specified route, passengers being picked up and set down at predetermined stopping points. A regular local bus service must operate every timetabled journey, whether people are using it or not. Passengers cannot pre-book travel but simply hail the bus at any recognised bus stop. These services must accept concessionary passes during the core scheme hours (0930-2300 Mon-Fri, any time Sat/Sun).
- 5.2. A flexibly registered local bus service may incorporate diversions away from the core route when requested and can also be designed to only run on demand for pre-booked passengers. Such services still have fixed times for journeys which cannot be varied to meet passenger requests (e.g. if a bus is due to leave at 1000 it cannot be delayed to 1030). Depending on how the service is registered it may be able to accept concessionary passes.
- 5.3. A fully flexible, demand responsive solution must operate on a pre-booked basis only so journey options within the defined area are limited only by the availability of vehicles and drivers. Such services fall outside the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme, although acceptance of passes can be funded by the local authority.
- 5.4. To provide bus services in England, bus companies must gain an operator's licence from the Traffic Commissioner. This defines operating base, number of vehicles allowed and ensures the company meets the standards required to run buses. Buses used on services by holders of these licences must comply to current accessibility standards – step free entrances, suspension that can be lowered to ease boarding, wheelchair spaces etc.
- 5.5. Once established, services must adhere to various conditions or the operator may face penalties imposed by the traffic commissioner. All passengers must be able to pay a separate fare, although group tickets are also permissible. This distinguishes local services from private hire arrangements.

5.6. Local Authorities are not supposed to support services that would operate in direct competition with a commercially operated route. Certain exceptions to this rule are permitted: e.g. a Park & Ride service from the edge of a town to the centre would be OK if it served no other stops or only a limited number along the route. This would be unlikely to attract current users of bus services along the route so would not be seen as competition. Competition is also allowed where there is no alternative, such as when two services from small villages both use the same road from the edge of town to the centre because that is the only road suitable for buses or it features a key intermediate destination such as a hospital. In such cases it would be unreasonable to impose an extended journey time on users of the supported service or force them to have to change bus to avoid competition. SCC has in the past faced challenges over continuing to fund a supported route after the introduction of a similar commercial service.

Some competition issues may be resolved through the planned introduction of multi-operator ticketing and multi-journey fare capping. These products would ensure a fair distribution of revenue between operators along shared routes as well as encouraging travel by allowing the freedom to use any bus at any time without having to pay separate fares each time. Discussion on the idea has led to agreement between most operators in Suffolk under the Enhanced Partnership, but implementation has been put on hold whilst the current, Government funded, £2 single fare cap is in place.

5.7. Flexible services can also be provided by Community Transport or Taxi operators. Taxi companies need to obtain a special-restricted operators licence from the Traffic Commissioner which grants them the ability to run on fixed routes and charge separate fares with vehicles of up to 8 passenger seats.

5.8. Community Transport operators can operate under a section 19 permit for fully flexible services or a section 22 permit for fixed route/timetabled operations. Services operated under section 19 conditions may only carry pre-booked passengers, whilst section 22 routes can be hailed at bus stops as with a regular local bus service.

5.9. Contracts between the Council and operators for the Buzzabout and Katch DRT services have already been written and approved by Legal Services. These operators are local established and experienced community transport providers who have policies and procedures in place for passenger welfare including health and safety, safeguarding, data protection and equalities.

## **6. Risk Implications**

6.1. Rural community transport represents significant strategic challenges, with many of the symptoms experienced at local level arising from national delivery models and funding that do not work as well for residents in non-metropolitan parts of the UK.

6.2. Continuation of Buzzabout until 31 March 2026 represents a relatively low risk option as we already have a workable model, and the additional funding has already been secured. However, an additional factor to consider is that Buzzabout does not currently accept concessionary passes, and this will need to be introduced to fulfil the BSIP2 funding criteria. For this offer to be introduced into the service in August 2024 we would expect a sharp increase in passenger numbers, but their fares would need to be paid to the

operator by East Suffolk Council, thus pushing up the operating costs. The Community Partnership Board has allocated a sum of £18k which it is estimated will cover this.

- 6.3. Continuation of Katch until 31 April 2025 is also a relatively low risk option as we already have a workable model (apart from the app, which has been removed from the service as improvements were not forthcoming). Obviously, there is a more significant short term financial risk to the Council than Buzzabout, as grant funding was not achieved through BSIP2, but this also means that the costs for concessionary passes do not have to be covered.
- 6.4. It is the intention for both pilots that, through increased marketing and promotion, passenger numbers are increased significantly to offset the amount of subsidy required going forward – but it is important to be realistic and note that it is unlikely that either service will reach the point where subsidy will not be required at all.
- 6.5. Lack of access to transport can exacerbate issues around poverty and social isolation both of which are priorities for the Council and the Community Partnership Board. Several individual Community Partnerships are now ‘poverty proofing’ projects supported by the Partnership to ensure that they are not disadvantaging those on low incomes who are living in relative, deep or very deep poverty. Transport is an issue that comes up regularly through both rural and poverty proofing.

## **7. Options**

- 7.1. As much of East Suffolk is rural, combined with geographic limitations through the location of rivers for example, this presents some challenges for residents to access services by public transport. The railway line running through the district providing direct access to several market towns and many other villages, there is an opportunity to encourage greater use of the service and scope to improve integrated transport links at the East Suffolk Line Stations.
- 7.2. Throughout the district, access to services by public transport can be difficult, particularly in the more remote parts of the district. Conditions are better in the market towns where several commercially viable bus services operate. Opportunities exist to build on the innovative demand responsive public transport arrangements set up to service this area. Our DRT services allow residents to connect with other bus services, including Connecting Communities DRT bus services which are operated by the County Council and community transport providers, and this opens up the district to residents.
- 7.3. Community transport notoriously does not make a profit or even breakeven. However, it’s social value is crucial to residents in the more rural areas of our district. It will be possible to apply lessons learned from operating Buzzabout and Katch to get some understanding of what levels of subsidy is likely to be required to make DRT services financially viable.

## 8. Conclusion

- 8.1. The fact of the matter is that services like Katch and Buzzabout are taking place in rural areas where commercial providers do not operate. They do not operate in these locations because there is not enough passenger demand for them to turn a profit. This being the case, there is a high likelihood that any service provision put on by East Suffolk Council to fill some of the rural transport “deserts” will not cover its costs. However, other social value benefits mentioned earlier in this report may be considered to outweigh any financial shortfall. These will be matters for East Suffolk Council to weigh up as it explores whether or not it wants to expand its role in transport provision. Should it wish to go further, it will also be prudent to take a partnership approach at a regional, county and local level to ensure that there is join up and collaboration in transport provision and best use of funding opportunities.

## 9. Recommendations

- 9.1. That the Committee consider this report

## 10. Reasons for Recommendations

- 10.1. To support the Committee to review rural transport services in East Suffolk.

### Areas of consideration comments

#### Section 151 Officer comments:

There are no direct financial implications associated with the report recommendations. However, following the Committee’s review, there may be recommendations raised which do have a financial impact and would need to be considered in terms of available budget.

#### Monitoring Officer comments:

No additional comments.

#### Equality, Diversity and Inclusion/EQIA:

Equality Impact is a key requirement in procuring transport services

#### Safeguarding:

Safeguarding is a key requirement in procuring transport services

#### Crime and Disorder:

N/A

#### Corporate Services implications:

*(i.e., Legal, Finance, Procurement, Human Resources, Digital, Customer Services, Asset Management)*

Contracts between the Council and operator for the Buzzabout and Katch DRT services have already been written and approved by Legal Services.

Budget provision has been made to support the pilots as described in the report.

Budget provision has been made for a new project manager as described in the report.



**Residents and Businesses consultation/consideration:**

Results of residents' survey considered in this report. Community involvement underway via the individual community partnerships

**Appendices:**

**Appendix A** | None

**Background reference papers:**

Date	Type	Available From
March 2024	Transport East Report – Rural Connections: Transport Challenges and Opportunities for Communities in the East	<a href="https://www.transporeast.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/JFG6592_TransportEastReport_AW-WEB.pdf">https://www.transporeast.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/JFG6592_TransportEastReport_AW-WEB.pdf</a>