

Written evidence submitted by East Suffolk Travel Association (BCC0035)

We welcome the initiative of the House of Commons Transport Select Committee (TSC) calling for evidence in respect of Buses connecting communities.

Here are our comments.

Introduction

The East Suffolk Travel Association (ESTA) was formed in November 1965 by a group of people who had objected to the then proposal in the Beeching Report to close the East Suffolk Line, which connects Ipswich and Lowestoft. The line was saved from closure, and ESTA developed into an independent voluntary body providing a voice for train and bus users. We hold regular dialogue with train and bus operators and political decision makers. Promoting local bus and train services has always been part of our work and in recent years we have published a popular series of "Discover" leaflets for people to explore East Suffolk using either train and bus services or a combination thereof.

TSC criterion A)

Removing competition between local and county authorities seeking transport related funding, such as Norfolk and Suffolk County Councils, is crucial for the creation and maintenance of a better network of rural bus services. Furthermore, local and county authorities need additional powers and also resources to guarantee the long-term provision of bus services rather than only on an ad hoc, often annual, basis. In addition, through ticketing and timetable co-ordination would greatly assist many bus users.

TSC criterion B)

Recent Government policy has not tackled the decline of many rural bus services. Indeed, without a well planned and provided approach they will continue to suffer. Too often rural buses are cancelled or are late, and do not cover weekends and public holidays; often on the basis that they are not profitable. As such, rural bus provision must be based on wider than profit considerations.

TSC criterion C)

It is evident that bus routes and their services must connect, where possible, with train lines and rail services, as part of an integrated multi-modal public transport network. Indeed, ESTA has been promoting this concept by way of a series of five "Discovery" leaflets (see attached), which each indicate the railway and bus routes for a given part of East Suffolk, as well as relevant visitor information. Furthermore, many pensioners in the rural parts of East Suffolk cannot make use of their Bus Pass as there are no bus services to use. Fortunately, Suffolk County Council has a scheme whereby a free Bus Pass can be exchanged for Taxi Vouchers, which can be used as and when required.

TSC criterion D)

Many rural communities in our area suffer from poor connectivity to employment, health, education and other social provision. This adversely affects older and younger people in particular, especially if they or their relatives do not have ready access to a private car. For example, Halesworth, with a population of some 5,000 people, was often quoted as being the largest settlement in the England without a bus service to the nearest hospital located (in Norwich) many miles away. Fortunately, it now has such a bus link albeit with a change of buses in the city centre. Better public transport would make many rural communities and places more worthwhile to both live and thrive in.

TSC criterion E)

Current funding models and governance structures are flawed. They rely too much on the short-term, that is, for one or two years, which in turn handicaps proper transport planning and resource provision. Rather, longer-term concepts, with five year plans and ten year frameworks, would provide the confidence for future public transport provision for all concerned, especially bus passengers.

TSC criterion F)

We acknowledge that it is not possible to provide a full conventional bus service to every rural home, let alone hamlet, in East Suffolk. Unfortunately, however, too many villages and even towns in the county do not have adequate, such a seven day a week or evening, bus connections to nearby settlements or railway stations. Community Transport operators, including BACT (Bungay Area Community Transport) or on-demand bus services, such as

KATCH, with services to Wickham Market railway station and surrounding area, provide an alternative but need to be better supported by local government to ensure such transport options have a long-term future with paid minibuss drivers rather than having to rely on the availability of volunteer drivers, as currently happens.

TSC criterion G)

While franchising bus services may be suitable for metropolitan and other large urban centres, it is not for rural areas, where alternative public transport solutions are required in order to provide a mix and match network of bus operations, which together with taxi and train services, can provide comprehensive coverage for all types of public transport users. The Enhanced Partnership Passenger Group, administered by Suffolk County Council, with representatives of parish councils and also ESTA, allows for closer working relationships between bus operators and local communities. If suitably funded such partnerships can provide a sound basis for the planning and provision of long-term bus services that take into account the needs of many potential passengers living in rural East Suffolk.

TSC criterion H)

There is a definite problem with cross border bus services, which need to operate effectively across different counties such as Norfolk and Suffolk. Unfortunately, the "invisible" county or other council boundary sometimes stops a bus route connecting two places in different administrative areas. To rectify this, there should be a "Duty of Cross-border Co-operation" across such boundaries to enable bus services to continue beyond a border rather than to terminate and turnaround just before as now often happens.

Summary

ESTA (East Suffolk Travel Association) seeks better public transport for everyone, including residents of and visitors to East Suffolk. Our membership desire improved bus services, more bus-train connectivity and greater long-term planning to ensure both integrated and comprehensive public transport provision throughout East Suffolk.

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