

# Good practice in sustainable leisure travel: Twenty case studies

Over the last two decades, there has been significant growth in the number and range of public transport projects aimed at bringing visitors to leisure destinations in more sustainable ways than the private car.

This has been done for two main reasons. First, to enable those without access to their own transport - still around 25% of households in the UK and including many overseas visitors - to enjoy equality of opportunity to access many publicly-funded leisure destinations, such as National Parks, Country Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Second, to help mitigate the negative impacts of mass car-borne tourism on fragile countryside destinations.

Many of these schemes were supported by the former Countryside Agency, which, from the late 1990s onwards, grant-aided many rural transport schemes in England through Rural Transport Partnership (RTP) funding, most notably the Vital Village and Wider Welcome project funding. Wider Welcome alone was responsible for more than 100 leisure-transport projects during its three year life between 2001 and 2004.

With the end of this period of funding, it was felt important to see what had happened in the intervening period so that Natural England would have an up-to-date overview of the situation in terms of which successful projects described in literature produced by the Transport 2000 Trust and by the Agency itself in recent publications were still flourishing, despite the difficult funding regime now being experienced. The research was therefore intended to review and refresh those previous studies. In particular, Natural England wished to see to what extent the successful Case Studies and any other new projects which had emerged were meeting the following four major criteria of good leisure transport schemes:

- Schemes, services or projects which provide user-friendly and effective information.
- Schemes which demonstrate innovation, tackle social exclusion and deliver multiple benefits.
- Successful partnership approaches.
- Effective and long term funding packages or arrangements which adhere to recommended guiding principles and follow sound business planning procedures.

## What was done

The research began with a brief examination of the existing literature, not summarised in the text but which was a starting point for the study.

Officers in each of the Regional Offices of Natural England with a responsibility or special interest in leisure transport matters were contacted by e-mail, both for

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feedback on the current situation in respect of the Case Studies highlighted in recent literature, but also any new innovative or successful schemes that they were aware of that might be considered for inclusion.

The contractor was also able to call on almost 20 years experience in managing the Countryside Agency's own Sustainable Recreational Transport Advisory Service (1997-2005).

A short list of around 25 best practice examples was selected. These were carefully balanced between different Regions of England, but one example from Scotland and two from Wales were included because they were outstanding examples of innovation and success with important lessons for England. There was also an attempt to show a wide variety of schemes and differences in scale, from projects in deep rural areas carrying only a few thousand visitors per year, to major, long established schemes in a National Park area carrying up to a million visitors per annum. Most were fairly well established schemes, but two new (post 2006) schemes were selected to demonstrate ways currently being used to fund start-up projects.

In each case, Project Champions for each scheme were identified and contacted, by both telephone and email, using a standard questionnaire so individual officers replied in a standard format. This enabled some valid comparisons between schemes to be made.

A brief concluding section was added to each Case Study description to underline the key lessons for other destination managers and transport operators, and also the wider implications emerging from the experience of the particular project.

Out of the 25 initial schemes a final 20 were chosen. Those rejected were because the schemes in question had either ceased; were in difficulties because of a funding crisis; or busy managers lacked time to respond to queries - and where there was usually an equally good example to choose.

### Results and conclusions

Responses from all contacts indicated that leisure travel in the English countryside is now facing an extremely difficult period owing to a number of factors:

- cutbacks in local Government transport funding putting Sunday leisure services in particular at increased risk;
- changes in EU regulations on driver's hours and tachographs for any scheduled bus journey over 50km thereby increasing costs significantly; and
- loss of the Countryside Agency's RTP and Wider Welcome funding for rural transport.

The residual Countryside Agency transport funds were transferred to Rural Development Agencies (RDAs) in 2005. However, the RDAs have so far largely failed to appreciate and understand the small-scale nature of rural transport; most schemes do not meet their strategic criteria, which is largely interpreted as developing travel opportunity along major corridors between large centres of population or to or from key hubs such as airports. Requests for funding by local authorities or other agencies have mainly been ignored.

Despite this, many excellent, well established projects have continued to thrive and even expand, with increased revenue from passengers helping to offset loss of revenue support. The 20 schemes selected are not necessarily the best of their kind in England, but have been chosen to reflect a special strength in at least one of Natural England's four criteria outlined above. In fact, most reflect three if not four of the criteria, proving that successful, well-thought out projects clearly work well because they have been carefully thought through in more than one way.

However, almost all project managers report increasing concerns and difficulties about the future of their projects with many not able to predict with complete confidence that adequate funding will be in place to meet the proven demand for the service in question.

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This raises important questions about the wider issue of the actions needed to mitigate global warming and the increasing impact of emissions from private transport of which leisure motoring forms a part. Of special relevance is the fact that good access to local countryside from urban parts of England is a key factor in allowing individuals to pursue car-free lifestyle choices. Individuals who walk, cycle and use daily, urban public transport as well as more specialist weekend leisure services to access their local countryside, not only have a far lower carbon footprint than their car-dependent neighbours, but are likely to be healthier and have less demand on the National Health service than those who are car-dependent and who are at greater risk of clinical obesity.

Investment in good urban-rural transport networks, especially to National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Heritage Coasts, Country Parks and other areas of fine countryside with access opportunities is a major investment in the nation's health and quality of environment. It should be properly resourced and regarded as a high priority by Government at a national, regional and local level.

The process of developing Visitor Travel Plans is not generally adopted in most of the schemes described because it is a relatively new concept. However, these would enable the environmental, social and economic benefits to be carefully measured and thereby offer a strong evidence base on which to secure future funding. This would also address a weakness noted in several of the Case Studies - a lack of robust monitoring of outputs and changes in visitor behaviour, which is important, especially, for example, in marketing-based projects.

Lack of long term funding commitment from Government is a major issue for Natural England to address. What is particularly regrettable is that several of the Case Studies have proven economic benefits that far outweigh the relatively modest financial support which is required to sustain them.

There seems little doubt that there is an urgent need for some form of national funding for sustainable leisure travel to and through into

England's finest areas of countryside, and to strategic areas of countryside close to our towns and cities. This might be administered on a Regional basis by Natural England on the lines of the former, highly successful Wider Welcome funding scheme. Such a national programme is imperative if the excellent Case Studies described in this report are to survive, let alone expand in the way that they clearly should, in order to meet the kind of reduction in carbon footprints, the wider health, environmental and rural economic agenda that the Government hope to pursue in the decades ahead.

### Natural England's viewpoint

Natural England recognises the importance of having up-to-date examples of good practice which is exemplified in a range of case studies. Defra has recommended that the capture and sharing of good practice is a key role for Natural England in its efforts to advocate more sustainable leisure travel.

The issue of funding remains key to the delivery of more sustainable leisure travel and further consideration and discussion of whether this should be through a national programme, more regional and local delivery or some other means is needed. Direct funding of leisure travel schemes will not be a major part of Natural England's role, though on occasion small amounts of money may be put into individual projects to test new approaches and draw out lessons.

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### Further information

For the full details of the research covered by this information note see Natural England Research Report NERR021 - *Good practice in sustainable leisure travel: Twenty case studies*.

### Contact us

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