

CAN CINDERELLA GET TO THE BALL?

IMPLEMENTING THE GREEN TRAVEL, COUNTRYSIDE ACCESS AND SOCIAL INCLUSION AGENDA IN RURAL LEISURE TRAVEL

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1 INTRODUCTION

If rural travel is the Cinderella of transport planning, then rural leisure travel languishes on the Fairy Godmother's waiting list. Funding sources are scarce and options limited, with what budgets there are generally allocated to services bringing country-dwellers into towns, of little use to countryside visitors.

At the same time, parts of the countryside experience severe congestion, environmental degradation and diminished safety. Managers of countryside visitor attractions and access land are having to cope with increasing demands for car parking. Yet, a significant proportion of rural and urban populations is denied access to the many benefits of countryside recreation.

This paper sets out the problems and issues, and discusses, with the aid of case studies from the East of England, feasible ways of overcoming some of the real and perceived barriers to greener, socially inclusive countryside access, within the confines of restricted funding.

2 BACKGROUND

The Widen the Choice Rural Transport Partnership exists to make it easier for people to reach attractions in the East of England run by The National Trust and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) by greener forms of transport.

The National Trust and the RSPB are the largest environmental charities in the United Kingdom. They both want people to visit the countryside, but do not want to increase the environmental and social impacts of the travel generated. In particular, The National Trust has a national target for reducing the proportion of its visitors arriving by car from well over 90% in 1995, to 60% in 2020.

In the East of England ², the two organisations manage some sixty properties. These include a wide range of types. The National Trust is perhaps best known for its great houses in their own estates, such as Wimpole in Cambridgeshire and Blickling in Norfolk. In addition, the Trust has a wide range of other building-based attractions, such as water mills and merchant houses.

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Both bodies have large areas of open countryside, including internationally important nature reserves, such as RSPB Minmere in Suffolk, RSPB Titchwell Marsh in Norfolk or Wicken Fen National Nature Reserve, run by The National Trust in Cambridgeshire. The Trust is also responsible for extensive country parks and heritage landscapes, such as Hatfield Forest in Essex, Sheringham Park in Norfolk and parts of Dedham Vale on the Essex-Suffolk border, and manages extensive tracts of coastline and of the Chilterns Hills. The RSPB has extensive wetland reserves in the Yare valley in Norfolk, in the Fens of Cambridgeshire, and on the Thames estuary in Essex. In particular, the two organisations work closely together and with other partners to ensure consistent conservation management of land in the Suffolk and North Norfolk Coast Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs).

Many of these places suffer from too much traffic. Congestion, dangerous roads and pollution are not only urban problems, they are ever more serious in the countryside too. The impact is particularly noticeable in summer months in the AONBs, but 'ordinary' countryside around towns and cities suffers too, making tranquil countryside more remote and sought-after.

At the same time, many people are unable to experience the recreational benefits of visiting the countryside. A quarter of households nationwide has no access to a car, rising to nearly half in inner cities, not forgetting a particularly disenfranchised minority in rural areas themselves. Many who do have access to a car are put off by everybody else's!

Buses and trains are not seen as an option by many for getting out into the countryside, and walking and cycling have become much less attractive as motor traffic has become faster and heavier, and as rural roads have been upgraded to suit. Rural public transport has been starved of patronage as people who live and work in the countryside have been replaced by urban commuters and retirees. Buses have gone the way of other village services, shops and pubs, making the lives of those without cars in rural areas all the harder and forcing families who can ill afford it to have them.

The situation was exacerbated in 2001 by the Government's reaction to the outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease, with blanket closure of non-highway rights-of-way and admonishments not to enter the countryside, having a major impact on already precarious rural economies around the country. The people most excluded from the countryside at this time, walkers and cyclists, are also the two groups whose spending is of most value to the rural economy. Unlike motorists who tend to bring supplies with them from superstores, walkers and cyclists are much more likely to buy more frequently at local shops and pubs, so keeping money in the local economy.

Since then, however, there has been a real effort, in England through The Countryside Agency in particular, to improve rural transport and indeed to encourage visitors back into the countryside. Indeed, under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000), more of the countryside is now becoming accessible to people. The Agency operated a Rural Transport Partnership (RTP) programme, with project funding through its Vital Villages and Wider

Welcome schemes. This led to the formation of RTPs in each English county, concerned with improving rural transport across the board, and, in the East of England, allowed the Widen the Choice RTP to be created³. This partnership has a very specific remit, to make it easier for people to reach countryside attractions run by The National Trust and RSPB by means other than the car, in the context of access to the wider countryside.

3 THE WORK OF WIDEN THE CHOICE

In order to persuade people to travel on foot or by pedal cycle, bus or train, two elements need to be fulfilled: supply (*i.e.* effective availability of green travel facilities) and the generation of demand. The partnership has set out to achieve this by a number of inter-related methods:

- A green access audit for each property.
- Surveys to discover visitors' origins and preferences for information sources.
- Direct improvements to green access on-site.
- Partnership working to achieve improvements off-site.
- Good information provision.

Some of these are expanded upon in the following case studies.

4 CASE STUDIES

4.1 Green Access Audits for Countryside Attractions

A green access audit is carried out for each property of significance for visitors⁴. This begins with a desk exercise, examining maps, timetables, existing visitor surveys and published information. The known, surmised or expected origins of visitors are listed and any places from where it would be desirable to attract visitors are added. The latter may include towns or villages with good existing green travel links or populations with untapped potential, either in the socio-economic groups most likely to support the two organisations or socially excluded communities that might benefit from improved countryside access.

The next, and most important stage, is the field audit. The property and its environs are explored in person to establish the existence, quality, usability, legibility, safety and convenience of green access routes onto the property. Potential or actual foot, cycle, bus, train or ferry routes from all the previously listed origin points are tried out in person. This is not usually a phenomenally time-consuming exercise, as many of the likely routes will converge.

Following the on-the-ground audit, it is essential to talk to all relevant stakeholders.

- The staff of the property.
- Local Authority passenger transport (and community transport), cycling and rights of way officers.
- The county Rural Transport Partnership Officer (RTPO).
- Other local partnerships, particularly Community Rail Partnerships and AONB partnerships.

- Bus and rail operators (although in many cases in rural areas it is actually the county passenger transport unit which is responsible, as commercial bus services are less common).
- Cycling and walking interests, particularly Sustrans and cycling campaign groups, where they exist (this may include British Waterways, if routes use a canal towpath).
- Neighbouring visitor attractions, or those on the same public transport or cycle route, who may be willing to co-operate on green access work, or at least be supportive.
- Visitors – although this last can be the most difficult category to reach.

The result of this process is a series of recommendations that can be signed up to by property staff and a skeleton visitor green travel plan, which can be used as the basis of a fuller travel plan if there is sufficient motivation at the property in question.

In a number of places, effective *ad hoc* partnerships have formed to promote green access to the wider countryside around specific properties, sometimes formed as a result of communications with stakeholders. Membership of these partnerships varies, but may include local authority officers and members, county Rural Transport Partnership Officers (RTPOs), other neighbouring visitor attractions and community groups, as well as representatives of The National Trust and/or RSPB. These partnerships are an important way of progressing improvements and of sharing the workload.

The green access audit itself has been taken up by individual properties in other regions within the two partner organisations, as well as by the Youth Hostel Association's Empty Roads project. The latter is making use of it to create a database for hostels to advise their members on travel possibilities when they book.

4.2 Changing Perceptions: Getting the Right Information to Visitors and Potential Visitors

Good information provision is essential. Both the partner conservation organisations have traditionally tended to follow the common course of giving detailed information for those arriving by car, but only cursory, and often misleading, information for everyone else.

Both provide information about places to visit in a variety of forms:

- Handbooks or regional booklets.
- Individual property leaflets.
- Event leaflets.
- Advertising.
- Press releases and media copy.
- Web-sites.
- Telephone information.
- Signage.

Small-scale surveys, carried out for the partnership, have shown that those visitors who might consider using greener forms of transport would look in the first instance to find the necessary information for their journeys in the standard literature. This is the place where space can be most limited, but also necessarily where most effort will have to be put into improvements. The most flexible place, which scored well, if lower than e.g. The National Trust Handbook, is the Internet. Neither organisation has systems in place to keep web-based access information up-to-date and easily found, sometimes because of attitudes towards web-style based on viewing adverts rather than information retrieval.

The Widen the Choice partnership has attempted a step change in information provision, particularly for public transport users. The aim is to pull up the standard of general information provision within the two organisations, and there is some sign that this is beginning.

With the aid of The Countryside Agency's erstwhile Wider Welcome fund, and a number of smaller match-funders, the partnership has published a series of leaflets over the last two years. These are of three types:

- Single-sheet, DL-format (1/3 A4) flyers: "Come to XXXX by bus/train!" These have attractive material about the property on the front, with detailed information about reaching it by bus and/or train on the reverse, usually with a map of the walk from bus stops or the station to the property.
- Thematic, fold-out, DL-format leaflets:
 - "Birds by Bus!" (North Norfolk Coast)
 - "Birds by Bus & Train!" (Norfolk Broads)
 - "Birds by Boat!" (Norfolk Broads)
 - "Birds by Train!" (RSPB reserves across the region).
- An A5-format leaflet listing all the properties of the two organisations in the region with good cycle parking and/or close to the National Cycle Network or regional cycle routes, together with the closest railway station of use to cyclists.

4.2.1 Key lessons

- Special, glossy leaflets are expensive. Without external funding they cannot be reissued when stocks are depleted or information changes.
- The variability of bus services means that it is not always possible to give as much detail as would be desirable, even allowing for space constraints, especially if the leaflet is to have a useful life of more than a few months.
- This variability also means that great care must be taken at the production stage to obtain, from operators of commercial bus services and from county (generally) councils for supported services, as clear an indication as possible of the likelihood of significant changes to the services during the expected lifetime of the leaflet.
- Effective distribution is vital. Standard distribution contractors are expensive and may not offer adequate targeting. Leaflets need to be displayed particularly in places having green links to the property in

question. Property volunteers are ideally placed to do this, as long as there is a willingness on the part of the property to assist.

Whilst there is evidence of improvements to standard information in the two organisations, it remains to be seen whether, if continuation funding for the partnership is not achieved, a sufficient legacy has been left to make this a sustainable change without a dedicated officer to push it forward.

A lateral development is increased involvement by the two organisations in material promoting green links to wider areas of the countryside, developed by some of the *ad hoc* partnerships mentioned above. The material produced may not quite reach the aspirations of those produced over the last two years by Widen the Choice, but they are a way of keeping special promotion alive at lower cost.

4.3 Can Demand Responsive Transport Work for Visitors? The Case of CoastLink in Suffolk

CoastLink is a pre-booked, demand-responsive bus service for a beautiful and sparsely populated area of the Suffolk coast. Operating seven days a week with a wheelchair-accessible, MPV-style vehicle, it provides improved connections for local people and a means of reaching the area and moving about within it for visitors. It will meet trains at Darsham station, on the Ipswich-Lowestoft railway line, and longer-distance buses there and at Saxmundham and Leiston, as well as the ferry from Southwold at Walberswick. It is a 'many origins to many destinations' type of service.

The scheme is currently a pilot, funded by Suffolk County Council, the project leader, and the tail-end of The Countryside Agency's Wider Welcome fund, with contributions from The National Trust, the RSPB and Transport 2000 Trust (which funded the rear-mounted bicycle carrier). The budget and operator constraints mean that booking is manual and has to be done by 12 noon the day before travel to ensure scheduling.

It is always more difficult to promote pre-booked services to visitors, because:

- it is more difficult to get information to them;
- all-booked demand-responsive transport (DRT) services do not sit well with Traveline's data systems;
- there is generally a separate booking number for each service;
- booking times may be restricted;
- the system cannot cope with travel decisions made on the day, which is the way most day-trippers work;
- the information requirements stipulated by DfT DRT registration rules and, in some cases, by the operating permit rules, can be experienced as intrusive and bureaucratic, particularly where visitors are expected to remember a membership number for future bookings – which is of course different for every scheme around the country they might use!

All in all, visitors would be forgiven for considering DRT too much hassle, being far less flexible (although cheaper and potentially more available) than

taxis and minicabs, and much more complicated than conventional bus services.

It would appear that leisure trips represent only a small proportion of DRT patronage generally, and those by visitors to the area especially so. If it is going to work anywhere for visitors as well as locals, then the Suffolk coast is probably one of the most likely places, with visitors to RSPB Minsmere coming from across the country, and therefore likely to be planning their journeys further in advance than those closer at hand. Furthermore, a significant number of people visiting Minsmere on holiday stay locally, and can be introduced to CoastLink at their accommodation, by whatever means they arrived in the area.

So far, signs are promising. Ridership increased steadily over the winter, when promotion was primarily to locals via parish magazines and word of mouth. Promotion to visitors began in late March and numbers were rising again in April.

5 THE FUTURE

Despite the push over recent years to encourage countryside access, times have become uncertain. Following the Haskins review of rural service delivery, The Countryside Agency has disappeared as a transport grant-making body and responsibility for supporting rural access in England has passed to the Regional Development Agencies (RDA). Countryside access and reducing car dependence has fallen between stools, as it is not generally seen as significant by RDAs, with their focus on economic growth, notwithstanding their ostensible role in supporting environmental and social sustainability.

Similarly, the Government has, as is well known, turned away from the goals with which it took office two parliaments ago, of reducing traffic and making major improvements to greener transport. Sustainable transport and rural access are still the Cinderellas of Government policy. The Ugly Sisters can drive their SUVs to the Ball, but often the best Cinders can hope for is if she lives in an area where, if she manages to get to a phone during office hours, she can book a community car the day before, and probably have to leave the Ball early too!

However, the social needs of rural dwellers at least have a degree of recognition, even in the post-Haskins environment. On the other hand, green access for countryside visitors has made only limited progress and funding has returned to the scarcity experienced before The Countryside Agency's short-lived Wider Welcome programme.

In this atmosphere of tight funding, it is vital that all concerned with countryside access promote the use of those green links that do exist. The phrase "use it or lose it" has never been more appropriate. In some places it may be possible to combine countryside access with social agenda access, as with CoastLink, but it remains to be seen how widely such models can be

applied. The real risk, even more than the lack of funding, is that many ideas for filling gaps in the green travel network will fall at the first hurdle: the “can’t be done” trap.

There are many things that can be done, often small projects that can contribute to an improved bigger picture in aggregate. Unfortunately, countryside managers and local authority officers alike succumb all too often to the “can’t be done” attitude, especially so when transport planners are holding the line in the face of Central Government policy indifference. It is hardly surprising that non-specialists despair, if transport planning professionals find it difficult to make changes.

This is especially dangerous if aspirations are too high, which is often the case and understandable where countryside managers have little experience of transport provision. A proper green access audit and open discussions with other bodies provides both a realistic view of what is feasible and pointers to opportunities that may not previously have been obvious.

In the long term, we can expect outside pressures, particularly in relation to oil reserves and climate change, to begin to affect Government policy. When that time comes, it behoves those concerned with countryside access to be in the vanguard of change. That means putting in the ground work now, even if the results appear, at present, to be limited.

Notes

¹ The Widen the Choice Rural Transport Partnership consists of The National Trust, RSPB and The Countryside Agency in the East of England, although the Agency's role has passed to the East of England Development Agency³.

² The East of England is defined by the Government and includes the counties of Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire.

³ The Countryside Agency has provided 75% funding for the partnership, which is being administered by the East of England Development Agency for the financial year 2005/6, following the cessation of the Countryside Agency's direct involvement in general rural transport.

⁴ Both organisations also have properties that are of great significance for nature conservation or heritage but which either receive very few or are not open to visitors.

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