

GREEN ACCESS AUDITS IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

Chris Wood

Widen the Choice Rural Transport Partnership
(The National Trust, RSPB and Natural England, in the East of England)

1. Introduction

One could be forgiven for thinking that transport problems are an urban phenomenon. Urban areas, by definition, have the greatest concentration of journeys, the greatest congestion and generally the worst air quality. The popular proxy for all transport ills is congestion, particularly that at peak, journey-to-work hours, so rural travel is the poor relation in transport policy, and rural travel for recreational purposes hardly gets a look in.

Congestion is only a symptom of the wider problem of too much travel and too much of it in private motor vehicles. Pollutants emitted by vehicles are no respecter of the urban-rural divide, or indeed international borders, which is why we have global problems of enhanced atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations and acid deposition. The urban focus of transport policy, with only belated recognition of access needs (too late for rural post offices, it seems), coupled with increased car ownership in the countryside, has led to the demise of rural services, in turn increasing both transport need and access deprivation. Buses are a key rural service that is still in decline, and walking and cycling have never been well provided for in the countryside since the motor car assumed dominance of country roads¹.

Health is a growing policy area, with initiatives to encourage exercise and outdoor pursuits, yet active travel is slow to gain recognition. Unfortunately the exercise agenda is promulgated by the sport sector, which tends to assume that recreational activities have to take place in locations only accessible by car and require specialist equipment that can only be carried by car. Even here, informal and non-commercial recreation plays second fiddle to organised recreational activities based around the obesity-friendly car!

At the same time, many popular tourist and recreation destinations are under increasing pressure from car-borne visitors. Road safety, air quality and local people's ability to cross the street are all compromised. Land is sequestered for car parking and fly parking causes erosion, obstruction and contamination of sensitive natural habitats. And there is increasing rural congestion, at least in the summer part of the year (itself expanding with a changing climate); villages from Wells to Windermere are clogged with cars.

The problem is recognised by local planning authorities and by grant-funders, even if there is little impact on resource allocation. Grant making bodies routinely require the developers of new visitor facilities to explain how they are going to ameliorate the environmental impact of the facility and its visitors. Likewise, a travel plan is now *de rigueur* for any significant planning consent. In addition, well thought-out visitor green travel plans serve to increase the social

inclusion performance of attractions, through diversifying access opportunities.

Increasingly, then, it is imperative for any recreational visitor attraction to have a plan for how it is going to reduce or at least ameliorate the environmental impact of its visitors' travel. This is true not only of facilities whose sole purpose is to attract and entertain visitors, but also of those whose main purpose is the conservation of nature or heritage, or the production of agricultural or forestry produce. In fact, it is even more important, politically, for facilities run by organisations with a strong conservation ethos.

Any such plan has to be based on an assessment of what options are available and what travel or access facilities exist 'on the ground'. Visitor attractions and destinations in the countryside are no different in principle to those in other locations, although the access facilities available and their quality are likely to be poorer, and the nature and geographical spread of visitors can differ markedly from urban and suburban locations.

This paper describes the process of auditing countryside attractions and destinations for green access. It is a process employed by the Widen the Choice Rural Transport Partnership in its work preparing visitor travel action plans for some sixty National Trust and RSPB properties across the East of England. It has been expanded into area-wide audits for parts of the Suffolk coast and linear audits for the North Norfolk Coast and the Icknield Way, supported by Suffolk Coast and Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Norfolk County Council and Natural England. In some cases, these audits have formed the basis of full green travel plans, as with the new Chilterns Gateway Visitor Centre, for Bedfordshire County Council and The National Trust. The concept was also adopted by the Youth Hostel Association's Empty Roads Project in order to give the best access information to people booking accommodation.

1.1 The Widen the Choice Rural Transport Partnership

Widen the Choice brings together The National Trust, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and Natural England. It covers the East of England region, as defined by the Government (*i.e.* the counties of Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire). Its remit is to find ways of making it easier for people to reach the countryside and rural wildlife and heritage attractions by means other than the car. The expected benefit of this work is reduced environmental impacts from car use in the countryside, improved access to the countryside by more sustainable means of transport, and greater, sustainable use of the countryside by all sections of society.

The National Trust has an aspirational policy of reducing the proportion of people arriving at its properties by car from well over 90% in 1995 to 60% in 2020. The RSPB has a similar desire to reduce the environmental impact of visitors travelling to reserves, whilst still encouraging people to visit to promote greater conservation awareness.

Natural England brings together the rural access aims of The Countryside

Agency, the access to nature and nature protection aims of English Nature and the stewardship remit of the Rural Development Service. Natural England's *Strategic Direction 2006 – 2009* aims, amongst other things, to:

- secure improvement in the condition of the natural environment and public access to it;
- increase the number, diversity and frequency of people enjoying the natural environment;
- reduce the transport impact of nature-based tourism;
- improve the condition of National Trails and bridleways; and
- contribute to the major national and international efforts required to address climate change.

As part of these commitments, all National Nature Reserves in Natural England management will be developing visitor travel plans.

The Widen the Choice partnership is an independent, catalytic animator in the rural recreational travel sphere, able to make the links between organisations and sectors with different agendas, thereby creating innovative approaches and projects.

2. THE GREEN ACCESS AUDIT PROCESS

The process of completing a green access audit takes into account walking, cycling, bus, train and ferry connections. It begins with a desk-based audit, followed, crucially, by detailed field inspections, giving the basis for discussions and negotiations with staff of the property and external organisations, particularly local authorities, in order to work towards real improvements. The process is rarely as clear cut as is presented here. This is the ideal case, but time limitations inevitably mean that discussions with key people (internal and external) often have to take place before fieldwork is finished. It is important to keep channels of communication open. Furthermore, the exact procedure depends on who is carrying out the exercise. Local authorities will have in-house access to various resources not available to outside bodies. These resources therefore form part of the desk research (section 2.4) for local authorities, whereas other organisations are only likely to gain access to the information at the stage of talking to relevant other people (section 2.7).

2.1 Purpose

The purpose of a visitor green travel plan is to facilitate maximum access ² to and around a given property or destination area by relatively sustainable forms of transport, *i.e.* walking, cycling and public transport, including train, bus, 'demand-responsive transport' (flexible buses and taxibuses), community transport and boats (ferries and river buses ³) ⁴. As part of this, it is likely to be appropriate to plan for reduced car parking and related facilities. The plan achieves this purpose by providing information on and agreeing ways of realising what is desirable, possible and practicable.

It is worth emphasising that a green access audit is not designed to be a full disability access audit. There is no reason why this cannot be included,

although it will significantly increase the workload. The reason it is not a fundamental part of the audit, however, is that few rural routes and services are accessible to disabled people, despite the best efforts of some bodies. Detailed disabled access audits are best employed for on-site movement (including the links to green access points, not just the car park) and for specific external links, such as a footpath from a neighbouring village or a bus service, its stop and the route from the stop to the property.

2.2 When to do it?

Any organisation that is serious about greening and diversifying visitor access needs to carry out green access audits for its properties as early as possible. For a new facility, or where one is expanding or being upgraded, it is important that green access is incorporated as part of the physical planning process. If the access road is already in place by the time of the audit, there may not be the resources left to correct mistakes. It is in any case generally cheaper to get it right at the start than to alter infrastructure at a later date⁵. Furthermore, where land is being purchased, there may be the opportunity to acquire other land to provide key green access links, which would be more difficult and more expensive afterwards. However, in order to make such judgements, on land that may be available, but not relevant to the primary purpose of the purchase, a preliminary, necessarily confidential, green access audit needs to have been carried out.

2.3 Who should do it?

The audit is based on common sense, but that is all too often filtered out by simplistic assumptions about other people's likely behaviour, lack of knowledge, simple conservatism, and blinkered approaches to health and safety⁶. A broad experience of green transport is therefore essential, which can be found in local authorities and some consultancies, but is rare in organisations managing the countryside. On the other hand, the ideal person to carry out the audit is one who has some on-going responsibility for taking recommendations forward, even if only in an advisory capacity. Each situation is different, and a partnership approach, involving open-mindedness and flexibility cannot be stressed too much.

2.4 Desk-research

The aim of the first part of the audit is to gather together background information on access possibilities, what visitors already do, and where people come from, as well as where those people live, whom it is desirable to attract for the purposes of income, education or social inclusion. Access possibilities can be taken from the following sources.

Maps, particularly the Ordnance Survey Explorer series (scale: 1:25,000), give knowledge of roads, public rights of way⁷, Access Land, etc. Information on permissive and habitual routes can often be gleaned from cycle route and local walks maps (although the status will need checking) and on major cycle routes from Sustrans (<http://www.sustrans.org.uk>).

The status of all rights of way should be checked against the Definitive Map, held by the county or unitary council. Particular care should be exercised in relation to the uncoloured minor roads on the Ordnance Survey map. Some of these are public highways; others are private and may or may not have access agreements on them.

Farm conservation walks, under time-limited stewardship schemes, can be found on the web-site of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (<http://countrywalks.defra.gov.uk>). Further on-line resources include the Government agency interactive environmental designation map site, <http://www.magic.gov.uk>, which even includes a distance-measuring tool. Local authorities are likely to have geographical information facilities to hand.

Timetables for public transport services in the area are available from operators or local authorities (the county or unitary council), although the latter may not have the resources to keep printed material up-to-date. The best on-line sources are TraveLine (<http://www.traveline.org.uk>) for scheduled buses and National Rail Enquiries (<http://www.nationalrail.co.uk>) for trains. Individual operators or local authorities may also have more locally appropriate on-line resources.

Demand-responsive buses tend to be less well promoted, not featuring at all on Traveline, so that local knowledge and communication with the Passenger Transport and Community Transport officers of the county or unitary council is needed. These people will also have knowledge of ferries and community transport services available locally, as will transport officers (where they exist) of county Rural Community Councils (RCCs). A few counties in England still have Rural Transport Partnership Officers, most frequently based at the RCC, who will be able to help.

Local knowledge on the part of staff and any volunteers is important, if only because it can save time and resources. All information has to be checked, however.

As regards visitor origins and behaviour, any existing surveys of visitors to the property being audited, or others nearby, may be helpful, although the less so the older they are. Unfortunately, surveys (or the reports on them) do not always contain helpful travel information, particularly if they have been carried out to ascertain customers' satisfaction or wants, or how much they spend. Distance travelled and 'drive time' contours are of limited value, except as a means of assessing where car-borne visitors could come from. The basic information actually useful in a survey is given in section 2.6, below.

With this knowledge, it is possible to build up a picture of where people are coming from and how they are travelling, that can actually be translated into targets for encouraging people to shift to greener transport. Gaps in geographical distribution can also be seen, ones which it might be desirable to fill for reasons of education, social inclusion or revenue.

Having established where people are coming from (which may be anecdotal if no surveys exist) and from where it would be desirable to have visitors, the green transport links to those places can be identified. Furthermore, green transport links to other places may become evident, as maps and timetables are perused, that give opportunities for reaching new audiences and increasing the proportion of people coming by green transport at the same time.

2.5 Fieldwork

Fieldwork is the most important part of a green access audit. Having established what should be available, it is essential to test it. Foot links should be assessed on foot, cycle links by bicycle or on foot (although preferably by bike), and public transport by actually using it. Driving around the area is not adequate. This on-the-ground audit should ideally be carried out in all conditions, wet and dry, summer and winter, if time allows, as the usability of a route can vary tremendously depending on such factors as drainage, being shared with horses (they churn up unmade surfaces) or maintenance regimes. It should not need stating that the audit goes beyond the property landholding; the survey is of links to where people come from. Likewise, the audit is best performed without prior announcement, exactly the way a visitor would experience the journey.

Some questions to ask during the audit include the following. This is far from an exhaustive list!

- Is there a convenient right of way or permissive path and for whom is it passable (able-bodied people, wheelchair users, those with pushchairs, cyclists...)? Remember that most people do not have mountain bikes and not all cyclists can lift their machines. Some byways and bridleways are hardly passable on foot, whilst some footpaths are comparatively broad highways.
- Is it permanent, or does it cross a ploughed field (with modern farming operations this can be legally obstructed by ploughing at any time and may well become covered by crops)?
- Is it safe?
- Does it have stiles or gates, and are the latter accessible to wheelchair users and cyclists?
- Is there a highway that has a footway or that is quiet enough to promote to walkers?
- Is the route legible? Does it have visible and readable signs that give useful information at all points where it is needed?
- Are there any point issues (such as regular shooting near a footpath, regular flooding, a particularly poorly maintained section, a barricaded gate or a footway obstructed by parked cars...)?
- Is cycle parking at the destination user-friendly, secure (lockers or 'Sheffield' stands), installed in accordance with Sustrans' guidelines (<http://www.sustrans.org.uk>), where people see it, convenient for the property entrance, unobstructed by cars, motorcycles or storage, and ideally under cover?
- Is there a bus or train service at useful times?

- How far is it from the bus stop or train station to the property?
- Is the route clear and convenient?
- Is it accessible by disabled people and cyclists?
- Can a bus or train user get straight onto the property by a short route, or do they have to use a circuitous route to get to the vehicle entrance?
- How easy is it to find the bus stop or station at the origin point(s)?
- What facilities are there at these bus stops or stations (seats, shelter, timetables, toilets...)?
- What is the service like (ride quality, delays, friendliness of staff, driving style, quality of vehicle, cleanliness, cost...)?
- Is the service (station or stop and vehicle) accessible for all (including disabled people and cyclists)?
- Is the bus driver aware of the destination?
- Is there information at the visitor centre, ticket booth or information point about green access options?
- Is there green access information in all property leaflets and on its website, and is this information accurate and up-to-date?

2.6 Surveys

Surveys are time- and resource-consuming, but can give valuable information about visitors, their travel behaviour and where they come from. Standard marketing surveys, at any rate of larger organisations, are frequently poor at asking the right questions from the point of view of green access. Distance travelled and 'drive time' contours are of limited value, except as a means of assessing where car-borne visitors could come from. The basic information actually useful in a survey includes the following items.

- Origin (post code or the name of the settlement, with county).
- Whether this is their home or where they are staying temporarily.
- If the latter, where home is.
- What forms of transport (all of them) they used to reach the property.
- Where they found information on green travel, if that is how they came, or where they might look should they consider walking, cycling or using public transport.

In addition, once the fieldwork has been completed, questions can be asked about specific routes and needs, as well as seeking people's reaction to any proposals, such as a new bridleway or bus route. It is important to remember, however, that surveys carried out at the property only catch existing visitors; they obtain no information about the majority of people who do not come. Surveys elsewhere, such as in nearby towns or on key public transport routes, are more difficult to organise and only a proportion of those asked will be likely to visit the property. Such surveys are best carried out in partnership with others with an interest in countryside access locally.

2.7 Discussions

Having ascertained what facilities and services are supposed to be available

and then tried them out for real, it is time to talk to people. Depending on who is carrying out the audit, some people on the list below will already have been approached, and, if carried out by someone not based at the property, fieldwork may have been co-ordinated with meetings with property staff. Key people to discuss findings with initially include the following.

- Key staff of the property and their county or regional office where relevant.
- Local authorities, *i.e.* county or unitary council officers (and for tourism and rights-of-way issues also district or borough councils):
 - countryside and rights of way;
 - cycling;
 - passenger transport (or public transport);
 - community transport (where relevant).
 - rail policy or partnerships (where relevant);
 - highways (who may have also have a sustainable transport remit);
 - tourism;
 - travel plans (particularly where planning applications for new facilities are involved);
 - sometimes economic development officers are relevant.
- Any independent rural transport officer, either the county Rural Transport Partnership Officer or transport officer of the county RCC, where such officers exist.
- If the property is in a protected landscape, there will be a body responsible for its conservation and promotion, whether a National Park Authority (including the Broads Authority) or an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty organisation, which could be described by a variety of titles, such as a unit, partnership, project or conservation board. In addition, some areas aspire to protected landscape status, such as the Breckland of Norfolk and Suffolk, and, whilst not being well resourced, they may have organisations that are worth talking to.
- Bus operators, where the service is commercial; if it is supported by the local authority, then the passenger transport unit is responsible.
- The train operating company (where relevant) and any Community Rail Partnership.
- Other operators (ferry, community transport), where relevant.
- Sustrans and/or local cycling groups.
- Other, neighbouring attractions or landowners, where relevant.

There are other people worth talking to at a later stage, although there is no harm in making links early. Some will be useful for assisting with funding, some with promotion, some with guidance on design, and some with local politics. Examples include:

- the Local Access Forum;
- local councillors, parish council(s) and possibly the MP;
- other nearby attractions;
- walking, rambling, cycling and horse-riding groups;
- disability groups (who may even be able to help with disabled access design and audits);

- the regional tourism board;
- the local media;
- by no means least, visitors and potential visitors (see section 2.6).

2.8 Think of solutions

At this stage of the audit, the real green access situation should be evident, the directions from which people either come already or from which they could usefully be attracted should be understood, and the policy environment should be clear. Some links and facilities may be very good, others mediocre or poor; some may be non-existent. Where links are good, it is important to promote them. If people are not already using them, it is time to consider how they could be persuaded to do so. How can mediocre links be improved, or at least made more attractive?

Where links and facilities are poor or non-existent, then more work is needed. It may be that work on site is all that is required. That is relatively simple for an organisation managing a piece of countryside, even if planning permission is required. It sometimes happens, however, that a perfectly adequate route already exists and it is within the property's power to make it available, but the property chooses not to do so for political reasons (as opposed to conservation reasons). This is awkward, especially as outside bodies, such as local authorities with which the property may wish to work on access, are likely to question the motivations of an organisation that chooses not to use a resource, before committing any of their own.

Where work off-site is required, a local authority is in a better position than an individual property to take it forward. Whatever the best course of action, facilities off-site have to mesh with those on-site. This requires partnership working, even if it is simply between the local authority and the property.

Effective solutions require vision. A footpath across a ploughed field may not be very long, but it can make an entire route vulnerable and therefore not promotable. Potential solutions include diversion, upgrading to a restricted byway by negotiation or legal process, finding another route or even land purchase. All of these have different consequences and requirements for resources and political commitment, but the key thing is the whole route. A vision of a quality route allows greater commitment to finding a way around the difficulty.

At this stage in particular, conservatism is unhelpful. It is time to think outside the box. Solutions may be 'blue sky', but, having gone through the audit process, they will be anchored in reality. There may be no hope of getting a conventional bus service to the property, at least in the current climate, but that may not be the only answer. Other attractions in the area may well be in the same position. Perhaps a demand-responsive bus would work? Promoted to visitors and locals, such a scheme as CoastLink on the Suffolk coast can make even sparsely populated areas accessible at reasonable cost.

2.9 Agree and carry out actions

Having formulated potential solutions, the next stage is to agree a set of actions that work towards them. For a property, there should be commitments to carry out on-site actions, whether infrastructure or publicity. Likewise, there should be commitments to seek the implementation of off-site objectives. A local authority, clearly, will want to word its actions somewhat differently, according to resource allocation, but there is little point to any plan of action if there is no commitment (practical and financial) to implement it. Similarly, the actions have to be realistic and supported by those who will have to carry them out. Actions without ownership will not bear fruit. Ensure that the actions are supported by someone with authority to set work priorities!

There are two key kinds of actions, whoever carries them out. Good links need promotion and poor or non-existent links need improvement so as to become good, promotable links.

Promotion should go across the media used by the organisation. If it uses the internet, leaflets, a members' handbook, press releases or any other media, all should carry the green travel information. However, this information must be correct and up-to-date. Bus services can change at short notice, so that it is imperative to confirm with the local authority (for supported services) or the operator (for commercial services) if and when the details are likely to change and include the appropriate level of detail for the expected shelf-life of the specific item of publicity. Internet web-sites can be changed frequently, if there is the will, but this seems to be an advantage rarely embraced.

When seeking improvements or entire new links, it is important to be realistic, credible and flexible, but enthusiastic and tenacious at the same time. Even simple schemes can take considerable time to bring to fruition. Partnership working is often vital to success. Partnerships work best when the individual partners work together to achieve common goals, not just individual benefits, and are prepared for the long haul. In other words, don't ask: "Can you divert the bus up the access road to the visitor centre?" Ask instead: "How can we work together to improve and increase patronage on a bus serving our property?"

3. CONTACT DETAILS

Chris Wood
Transport Partnership Officer
Widen the Choice Rural Transport Partnership
RSPB Eastern England Regional Office
Stalham House, 65 Thorpe Road
NORWICH NR1 1UD
Tel. 01603 – 697 515
E-mail: chris.wood@rspb.org.uk

Notes

¹ There are notable exceptions to this, mainly on the National Cycle Network and on disused railway lines taken over by local authorities, such as the Ayot Greenway in Hertfordshire. Access Land designations have helped in some areas, but the land covered is not necessarily more accessible physically and is rarely located close to where people live; a journey has to be made to reach it.

² Total access may well be limited at a given place for reasons of conservation or other disturbance, but it is more often car-parking pressure that limits visitor numbers.

³ In addition, promoting access by boat can allow people to see the possibilities for reaching destinations without a car, even though private and privately hired motor boats (e.g. Broads cruisers) are not generally any more environmentally friendly than cars (although some are now powered by electricity or even waste food oil).

⁴ Motorcycles and mopeds are sometimes believed to be greener than cars, but their energy and emissions performance, *per person at typical occupancy levels*, is comparable to smaller cars. Overall, their performance in terms of noise is worse and, as their use increases, their smaller size allows greater illicit use and parking of motor vehicles in places where they are unwelcome, in turn creating conflict and an enforcement problem. Mopeds have a limited role in improving rural accessibility for some groups and powered two-wheelers obviously take up less space to park than cars, but a proportionate policy treats them no differently to small cars.

⁵ However, there are instances where changes before a contractual hand-over date would result in more expense than changing something physically afterwards. This comes about because of poorly thought-through agreements with contractors and, more importantly, poor green travel planning prior to engaging contractors.

⁶ For example: "There might be a risk to someone walking on a path on our property, with consequent risk of litigation, so we won't provide foot access, leaving pedestrians on the more dangerous road outside our land holding."

⁷ Public Rights of Way consist of Footpaths (access solely on foot), Bridleways (access on foot, horseback or pedal cycle, although the latter must give way to the former two), Byways Open to All Traffic (BOATs) and Restricted Byways (no motor vehicles), which are a new designation, replacing the old Roads Used as Public Paths and providing an alternative to BOAT designation. Access restrictions do not apply to landowners, and rights of way may well be on farm or other private access roads. There are also designated cycle routes, on which horse-riding is not permitted. Agreement can also be reached with the landowner to provide a formal Permissive Footpath or Bridleway, which may be withdrawn at any time or be closed on certain days. Many informal permissive routes also exist.