

EAST SURREY RURAL TRANSPORT PARTNERSHIP

Background

Rural Transport Partnerships were introduced in the spring of 1998 by the Government as one of three new initiatives to improve the provision of public transport for those living in rural areas. The responsibility for administering the Rural Transport Partnership funding stream and the Parish Transport Grant belongs to The Countryside Agency, who supports the work of over 100 Rural Transport Partnership Officers throughout England. The Government funding for both RTP officers and projects is due to finish at the end of March 2005.

The Partnership was established in the summer of 2001 to tackle unmet transport needs in the old East Surrey Health Authority Area. Its initial focus will be on the three rural districts in East Surrey –Reigate and Banstead, Mole Valley and Tandridge. In the longer term it is hoped to extend the work of the Partnership to the northerly boroughs in east Surrey of Elmbridge and Epsom and Ewell.

An RTP Officer was appointed during the summer of 2002, starting with the lead partner, Tandridge District Council, at the beginning of September 2002. The guidance from the Countryside Agency on Rural Transport Partnerships (Appendix 1), Partnership Officers, Action Plans and Delegated Funds requires that within six months of a Partnership Officer commencing employment, an Action Plan must be produced.

Action plans should aim to demonstrate how the partnership will deliver a long term enhancement in the quality of local transport services in the particular rural area or areas defined by the partners. Other key themes could include better co-ordination of existing voluntary, local authority and commercial services and the greater integration of rural bus, rail and taxi services.

Membership of the East Surrey Rural Transport Partnership

Tandridge District Council (Lead partner)
 Mole Valley District Council
 Reigate and Banstead Borough Council
 Surrey County Council
 The Countryside Agency
 Epsom and Ewell Borough Council
 Elmbridge Borough Council
 East Surrey Primary Care Trust
 East Elmbridge and Mid Surrey Primary Care Trust
 Surrey Voluntary Services Council

Information Gathering

During the last four months the Partnership Officer has undertaken an audit of all existing forms of transport that are available to rural dwellers within the RTP area. This has included all bus services, rail services, local authority and independently operated dial a ride services, community transport section 19 minibus operations, voluntary car schemes, postbuses and school transport services.

All members of the partnership have been interviewed and their particular interests, vis a vis rural transport provision, have been taken on board.

Other agencies with an interest in rural transport have also been visited and useful contacts have been made with particular reference to working together on joint projects in the future. Some of these agencies have funds that they are willing to contribute towards any schemes that the RTP wishes to put forward for Countryside Agency funding, which would meet the transport needs of their own clients.

Demand Responsive Transport

Demand responsive bus services are seen by many people in national and local government as one of the new and innovative ways to provide public transport in rural areas. This type of transport has been previously referred to as a taxibus service allowing the passenger to pre-book a journey with as little as half an hour's notice. The service does not have to operate to a fixed route throughout the length of its journey, but can "wobble" to pick up people from isolated houses off the normal route of the service. Previously, such taxibuses were restricted to vehicles with up to 8 seats, due to Hackney Carriage legislation.

With further flexibilities being introduced by the Government, demand responsive bus services are now being permitted with any size of vehicle and the operator need only identify a geographical area in which the demand generated service will operate. It will become very similar to what most people see as a dial a ride service, however, the big difference is that this type of service will be open to everyone, and not just to those who have a particular mobility difficulty.

Advances in satellite tracking technology and the development of the mobile telephone network have allowed messages to be sent to a terminal on a vehicle advising the driver of a request for a diversion to the normal route. With the timetableless route, the passenger has total freedom of choice when they travel – their only constraint is the area in which they can travel. If there are no bookings received then the service will not operate. It is different to turning up and waiting at a bus stop, journeys must be booked, but with only half an hour's notice required, it is more akin to a taxi service.

In order not to abstract revenue from existing bus and rail operations, it is proposed that the rural demand responsive (DRT) service does not run into local towns itself but connects with existing bus and train services.

The project would require a minimum of two vehicles and revenue funding for two years. It is anticipated that there will be at least one DRT in the Tandridge district and one in the Mole Valley/ Reigate and Banstead area. It is hoped that subject to approved funding from the Countryside Agency, the DRT services would commence in the late autumn of 2003.

The RTP officer is contributing to the scope of one of the possible targets for a Partnership Public Service Agreement that is currently being negotiated with the Government. The target would be to increase the amount of demand responsive bus services in rural areas in a specified period of time. The benefits would be a certain amount of pump – priming money, flexibilities and freedoms and if targets are met, then a sizeable reward at the end of the PSA.

The county's Safe Routes to School (SRtS) co-ordinator has highlighted schools in Tandridge that have approached him for support with transport schemes. It would seem sensible to try to interwork this school transport requirement into at least one of the Demand Responsive Transport services. Funding from the SRtS budget might also be available.

Help the Aged have expressed an interest in working with the East Surrey RTP to provide better transport links in the Leatherhead area. They have potentially money from another grant giving organisation that could be contributed towards a rural demand responsive bus service.

Information and Advice Service

A one-stop shop information and advice service would offer details on all the Dial A Rides/voluntary car schemes/community buses in the East Surrey area. At a later date, it would signpost the way to the call centre dealing with any bookings for the demand responsive service.

It could also be a single point of contact for people who need to get to health related appointments but are not entitled to Non Emergency Patient Transport by Ambulance. It may be the case that if there isn't appropriate transport for a patient, a taxi voucher, held by the centre, could be sent to the person concerned to help subsidise their journey (taxi voucher issues follow below).

The possibilities of establishing a vehicle brokerage scheme will be investigated, whereby a group or organisation that does not use their vehicle all the time may elect to enter that vehicle into a pool. This pool vehicle would then be available to other community groups or organisations that wish to hire a vehicle. The revenue would go back to the owner of the vehicle, less a small administration fee. A vehicle management service could also be offered.

The Partnership Officer would provide an advice service to community groups wishing to develop a transport scheme. Information could be dispensed on:

- the correct permit legislation to operate under;
- devising and resourcing a service;
- specification of vehicles:
- training and funding opportunities.

Minibus driver/escort training could also be undertaken for local authority staff and those driving minibuses in the voluntary sector.

Administering the RTP's Delegated Fund (see below).

To provide the above service it would be necessary to appoint one full time equivalent post to undertake all the above plus accommodation and office back up costs.

Transport Services for Young People

Working with Connexions (the new Government funded body providing advice, guidance, support and personal development for all 13-19 year olds), a number of potential projects have been identified that would make improvements to young people's access to training, employment, education and social opportunities.

A wheels to work scheme – offering a moped on a loan basis to enable young people +16 (could be open to anyone though) for those living in remote rural areas who do not have access to private transport nor have the option of using public transport to get to an education/work or training centre. Currently working with the youth service/schools and colleges/job centre plus to identify individuals who would benefit from this scheme.

Very few rural areas in East Surrey have an evening bus service. This means that young people have to rely on lifts to take part in activities. The following two suggested projects could overcome this problem, with only a modest cost to the young person.

An evening minibuss service taking young people, of any age, to activities in the nearest large town. The intention would be to use the down time on the Reigate & Banstead and possibly Mole Valley dial –a – ride vehicles, which are not used on a regular basis in the evenings. If this proves to be successful, then consideration will be given to extending the service to cover weekends.

Where group minibuss travel is not appropriate, taxi vouchers could be issued for isolated young people to get around in the evening. The possibilities of piloting such a scheme in Tandridge are already being investigated by the Tandridge Local Committee and SCC Youth Service.

A Delegated Fund for small-scale transport initiatives

This fund would be open to any group or organisation with the geographical limits of the RTP. The grant would be available for the provision of a new or improved transport service or facility, primarily for the benefit of people living in a **rural area** of the east of Surrey, to meet clearly defined needs. (Rural is defined as a settlement of less than 10,000 population)

The Delegated Fund for the RTP would be promoted and administered by the RTP staff and applications would be assessed once a quarter by a panel of judges selected from the members of the RTP.

(NB. this £10,000 per annum does not need match funding/in-kind contributions from RTP members).

A Community Transport Directory

A comprehensive community transport directory showing all dial a rides, voluntary car schemes, group hire minibuses, schools/nursing homes that want to get income for their vehicle when not in use. The directory would be available free of charge through all public outlets, such as council offices, libraries, hospitals, doctors' surgeries.

An RTP Website

The website would have links to all partners, as well as informing people of the services that the One Stop Shop (see above) can offer, plus information on funding opportunities and training for not for profit transport providers. The website could also carry a quarterly newsletter informing people of what's new in the community and voluntary sector within east Surrey, as well as an on-line version of the community transport directory.

Taxi Voucher Schemes

The well-established and successful Tandridge taxi voucher scheme, which offers books of taxi vouchers to eligible individuals with a mobility difficulty, could be extended to cover other districts and boroughs in the east Surrey area. It is hoped that the Social Services Department of Surrey County Council will provide the administrative and vetting service for this enlarged scheme.

Creation of a Community Based Transport Operators Forum

From consultations with community transport operators, there was an indication that there is a lot of transport being provided by voluntary and community organisations, but also a lack of information and communication between groups. It was suggested that a forum of community-based transport operators be established which would be open to all providers, both independent and local authority, to foster better working relationships between disparate organisations.

The forum would allow those concerned with the provision of community-based transport to:

- Become familiar with the work that other organisations undertake
- Share best practice
- Affect some resource sharing e.g. drivers, vehicles
- Be aware of what transport strategies are being worked upon within the whole of Surrey

It is suggested that the RTP facilitates this forum, but actions from meetings will be taken forward by partner organisations.