



**ESSEX COUNTY COUNCIL: GETTING AROUND IN ESSEX
A bus and passenger transport strategy**

RESPONSE BY UTTLESFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL

The District Council is grateful for the opportunity to comment on this draft strategy.

The first part of the questionnaire (Questions 1-14) is mostly about individual passenger experiences. The Council will deal in this response with the remaining more general questions. The Council hopes that many bus and non-bus users will take the opportunity to respond.

Proposal 1: Working in partnership

Q15: Do you believe we have left anybody out? Please specify who else should be included in our partnership.

The Council considers that the rail franchisee should be invited to join the partnership if it is not already included under “businesses”. The Rail Executive expects to see a step change in the service delivery of the next East Anglia rail franchise, which must include opportunities to improve the “door-to-door” travel experience for passengers. There is a role here for both the rail and bus industries to play through measures such as multi-modal ticketing, station forecourt improvements and a review of connection times.

The draft strategy refers to the setting up of a Bus Strategy Commissioning Board entailing a senior group, a working group and specific task groups. The Council’s concern is that the terms of reference of these different groups are clear so that there is no unnecessary overlapping or potential conflict between them.

Proposal 2: Customer quality commitment

Q16: Please tell us which of these are the top three issues for you?

In a rural area such as Uttlesford, the three top issues are:

- Frequency and reliability
- Live, real time information on bus location and route planning

- A commitment to supporting local community travel groups in identifying local growth opportunities

Uttlesford's bus network has two main characteristics.

Firstly, routes that form part of Stansted Airport's local bus network tend to be run regularly and have much earlier start and later finish times than routes which do not call at the airport. These routes are commercially operated, though some early and late buses (used mostly by airport staff) may be subsidised by the airport operator from money it receives from a levy on on-airport car park transactions. Reliance on these services and levels of patronage are likely to be high because of their more frequent nature and because they serve large centres of population such as Harlow, Bishop's Stortford, Chelmsford and Braintree. Any operational issues concerning these services can be taken up either with the bus operator or via the Bus Working Group of the Stansted Area Transport Forum.

Secondly, beyond this airport "umbrella", rural bus routes are what you would generally expect in a large district with a small, dispersed population – they are less frequent, are mostly contracted by the County Council and may not even be daily. Annex B indicates that, excluding the A120 corridor, there are few services in Uttlesford on weekday evenings and none on Sundays. Where buses are infrequent, it is of vital importance that rural bus passengers can have confidence that their buses will run and that they are informed as early as possible about delays or cancellations.

The other issues (responsive complaints handling, high vehicle standards, regular bus network review) are also extremely important. For instance if a bus service is infrequent that is one thing, but if it is also operated by a low quality vehicle it is doubly unlikely that patronage will increase.

Proposal 3: Better, well used services

Q17: What should be our priority areas for developing more services?

Of the nine options listed, the Council thinks that the following are the most important:

- Your local community
- Rural areas
- Services to hospitals
- Services to rail stations
- Services to shopping centres

Whilst the district has relatively high levels of car ownership, many cars are used on the commuter run and are not available for use throughout the day. Also, many people can have low levels of mobility (especially young adults and the elderly), and as a result may have poor access to key services. There must be a role here for the bus industry to work with the voluntary sector to enhance services for people without access to a car either at all or during the day.

The questionnaire also lists a tenth "other" option. In this category, the Council would include services to centres of further education.

In the draft strategy, it is proposed that transport operators would be linked into local highway panels to enable a jointly agreed and prioritised pipeline of infrastructure measures. This is welcomed, but the Uttlesford panel is already oversubscribed in terms of schemes proposed to available funding. Would it be expected that transport operators would be

invited to part fund schemes that would benefit the running of their services, and if that was the case would the Panel be expected to give higher priority to those schemes?

Proposal 4: Support for valuable, but not commercial, services

Q18: What else can we change to get better value from the services that Essex County Council runs?

Using the Proposal 1 concept of “*working in partnership*”, one option might be to work towards the setting up of community hubs in rural areas from where minibuss services (or shared taxis) could be run to key destinations. Hubs could be a local community hall, pub or village shop, and would ideally have secure cycle storage facilities, drop-off areas and footpath connections to encourage local people to use them as part of their onward travel. Services would be run at the times best suited to the local communities, and local people would have a role in devising timetables. This would enable communities to identify potential new services and needs, which is an aim under Proposal 5.

To encourage wider use of non-commercial bus services, the County Council could seek their sponsorship with the issue of reward points for tickets purchased. The draft strategy indicates that restructuring contracts so that they are more flexible and run for a period of a minimum of five years is being considered. The Council thinks that this is a good idea if it gives bus operators the confidence to invest in the service.

Proposal 5: Good customer information

Q19: What information would make using the bus more convenient for you?

In the Council’s view all of them apply equally, especially in areas where bus services are less frequent. All five options are about the ability to plan a bus journey in advance (perhaps as part of a multi-modal trip) and to know where the bus is at any point in time.

Q20: How would you like that information?

Again, all of the four options apply equally. It is undoubtedly important that the rollout of online information continues, but not all bus users will want, or will be able, to access information that way.

Q21: Have you tried searching for bus information online?

This question is about an individual user’s experience, so the Council will not answer it.

Proposal 6: Tailored solutions

Q22: Do you have any new or innovative ideas about how to provide bus services in Essex?

The preamble to the question remarks that some people live where the traditional bus service (a single large vehicle on a set timetabled route) is prohibitively expensive and inflexible. This applies to large parts of Uttlesford. The Council would add that where a large bus is not well used on a rural route it becomes carbon-inefficient compared to the use of a car. The Council’s answer to Question 18 is relevant to this question. What is required are smaller, cheaper (but not low quality) vehicles that can run to more flexible timetables where needed.

Proposal 7: Ticketing

Q23: What would help to make buying a ticket simpler?

- Being able to pay with a smart card or phone as well as money
- Being able to buy a ticket online

The other two options may not be as useful. Zoning or banding systems work best in densely populated areas. Group or family discounts would obviously be welcomed, but if they come with exclusions and prohibitions on times of travel they may not make buying a ticket either simpler or easier to understand.

Proposal 8: Focussed local planning

Q24: What are the most important things to consider in your area?

The preamble advises that Essex is a diverse county, and that services need to be developed that meet the needs of communities. In the Council's view, this is the key point.

In a district like Uttlesford, the main aim must be to meet the travel needs of a dispersed population where the use of a car is either not possible or is not the traveller's preferred mode. Value-for-money services need to be provided at times when people need to travel and, where necessary, making connections with other transport modes that are as seamless as possible.

Conclusion

Q25: Is there anything else you would like to see covered in our strategy?

There ought to be some detail of how progress against the eight proposals will be measured. It is suggested that short, medium and long term targets should be set in the final version of the strategy, with an annual (or at least biennial) progress report.

In rural areas there is a particular challenge to match seat availability to demand (see answer to Question 22). To see if this is being achieved, the County Council should consider whether some kind of bus efficiency metric can be devised which would log passenger kms travelled against available seat kms on a particular route.