

Passenger Transport Pilots in Mid Suffolk



Eye & Debenham

Harfield, Hordham, Weybread, Fressingfield, Laxfield, Spylham, Wingfield, Stradbrooke, Brundish, Wilby, Hoxham, Horsey, Oakley, Brims, Stranton, Sactham, Badlingfield, Adlington, Southam, Worlington, Tannington, Badlingfield, Beedfield, Ranton, Monk Soham, Ashfield

Offering affordable transport solutions for residents of the above villages wanting to travel into Eye & Debenham for shopping, education, socialising, work, medical appointments and onward travel.

- Accessible vehicle
- Small group travel
- Reducing loneliness and isolation
- 7am-7pm Monday-Saturday

rural connect




Menu

Book Online FAQ

Swift Taxi Cabs

Mid Suffolk

Taxi Bus

Funded and Supported by 

Click 1 Taxi Bus F

Stowmarket Circular

Stowmarket Circular

Stowmarket Circular

Stowmarket Circular

Debenham Circular

Hop On Board with Us!

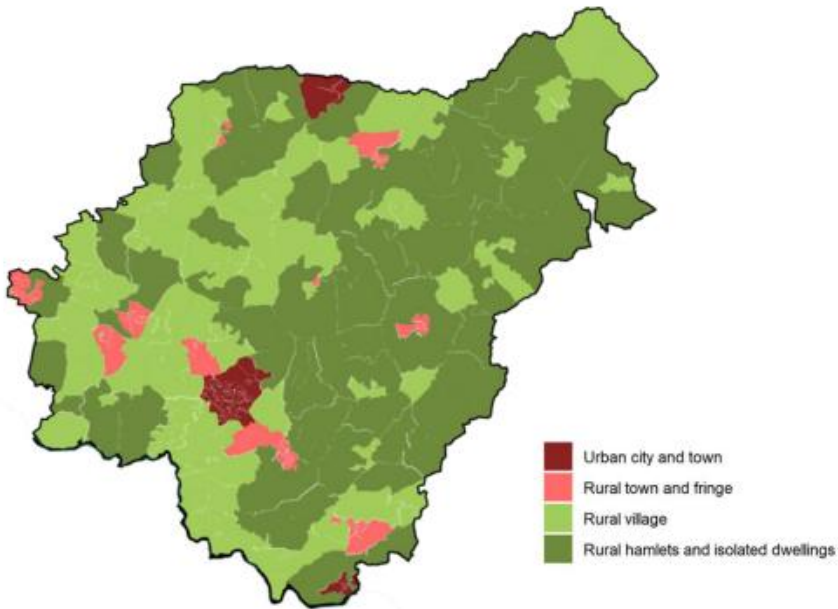
You don't need to book to use our service, just wait for us at your chosen stop and we'll pick you up and take you to your destination.



A Rural District

- Mid Suffolk is a local authority district located in central Suffolk. It borders all four of Suffolk's other districts and boroughs⁹, as well as the Norfolk districts of South Norfolk and Breckland to the north.
- The district is predominantly rural in nature, with 75% of its population classed as living in a rural area at the 2011 Census.¹⁰ Its main town is the historic market town of Stowmarket.¹¹
- Mid Suffolk falls within the least deprived third of local authority areas in England.¹² It has just two neighbourhoods (LSOAs)¹³ within the 40% most deprived neighbourhoods in England, both of which are in Stowmarket.

Figure 1: Urban-rural classification of Mid Suffolk district (2011)



105,723 Population (June 2022)



Median age of **48.1** (compared with 41.8 in the East of England and 40.5 in England)

Largest employment industries

- manufacturing
- construction
- health



Business growth, adult qualifications and workplace-based earnings all fall below the regional and national averages.



74.9% of households classified as owner-occupiers (Census 2021)



90.2% of households have access to a car or van (Census 2021)



Greenhouse gas emissions within the district reduced by **36%** between 2005 and 2021



Mean life satisfaction score of **7.15** out of 10



(where 10 means completely satisfied) compared with 6.91 across England (2023)



Life expectancy

Females **84.6 years** vs 82.8 in England
Males **81.1 years** vs 78.9 in England

84% of residents satisfied with their local area as a place to live (compared with 74% across England) and 72% agree they are proud to live in their local area (60% England)

★★★★☆



Median house prices are **8.93 times** median annual resident earnings (in 2023)



Average monthly private rents increased **21.5%** between October 2021 and April 2024



1,945

children aged under 16 (11.5% of this age group) living in relative low-income families before housing costs in 2022/23

The Transport need:



Connectivity

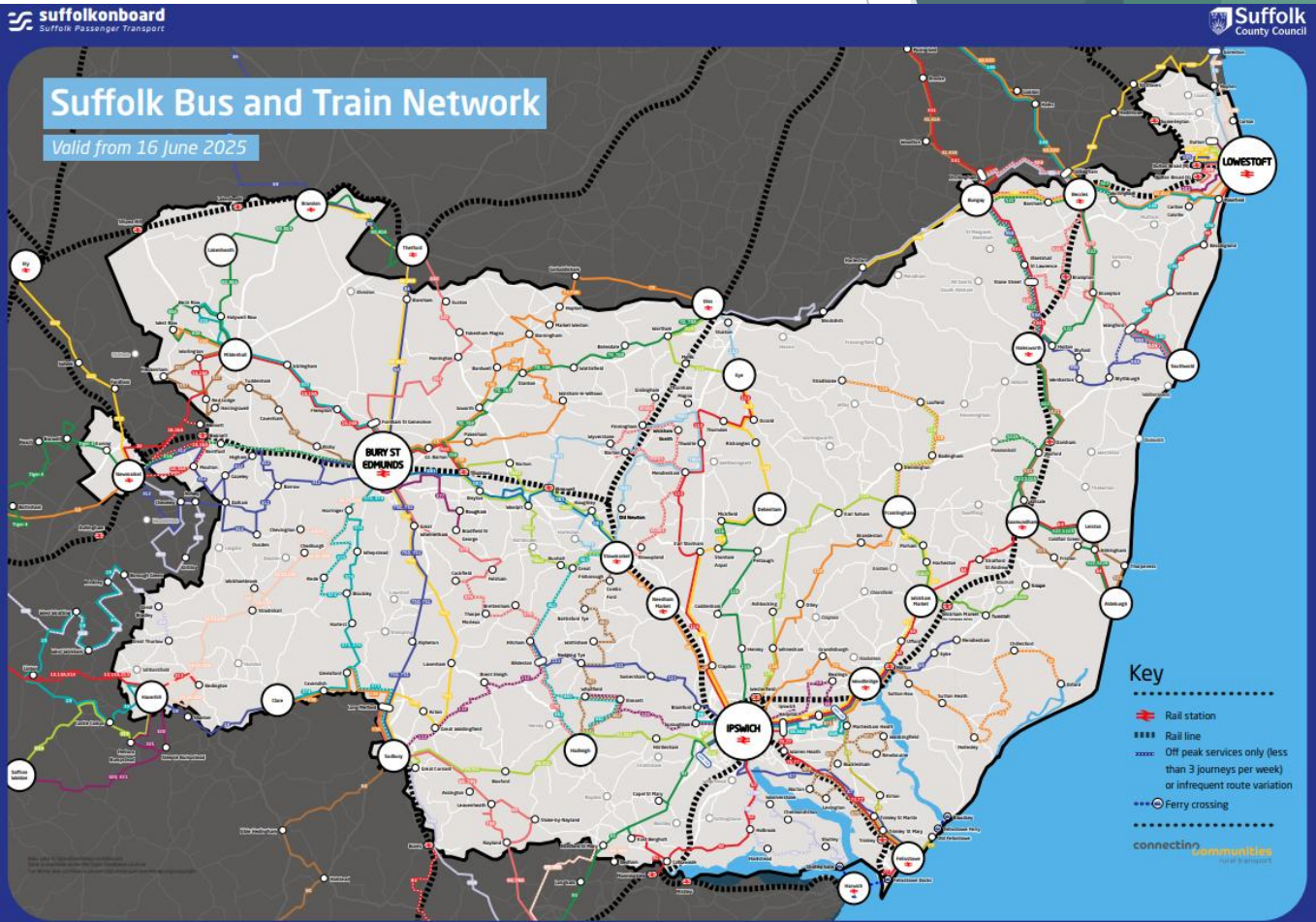
- As a predominantly rural district, there are increased challenges related to the physical proximity of local services and employment centres. This is illustrated by Table 1, which shows the average minimum journey times to access a range of key local services by different modes of transport.¹⁶

Table 1: Average minimum journey times in minutes to 8 key services[^] by mode of transport (2019)

	Mid Suffolk	England	England – urban areas	England – rural areas ¹⁷
Public transport + walking	32.4	17.9	15.3	30.1
Cycle	28.6	15.6	13.2	26.8
Car	14.6	10.3	9.5	14.0
Walking ¹⁸	55.2	28.0	22.2	55.4

Source: Journey time statistics (2019), Department for Transport (DfT)

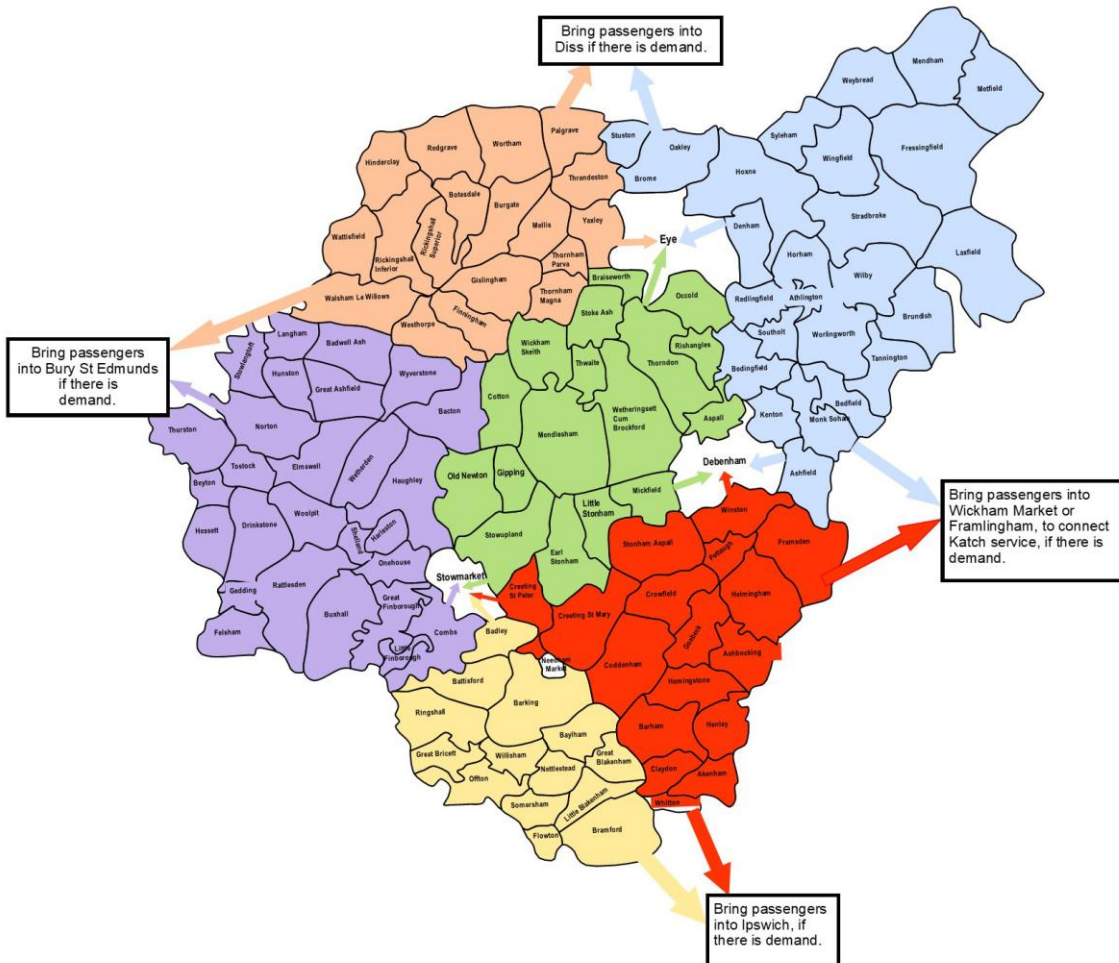
[^] Based on the average of minimum journey times to medium sized centres of employment (500-4999 jobs), primary schools, secondary schools, further education, GPs, hospitals, food stores and town centres.



The Funding: District Council Investment

- ▶ Back in 2022, a budget amendment put forward by the Green and Liberal Democrat group was agreed, which ringfenced up to £820,000 for “scheduled rural community transport utilising zero carbon electric buses” from the council’s “Growth and Efficiency” fund.
- ▶ Over the following year and a half, officers undertook extensive research and development work to establish the feasibility of the council delivering this provision ourselves, but in the end a plan was agreed to re-direct the funding into a grants scheme so that experienced transport providers who already had a more practical and viable set-up could take forwards the ambition.

The Mid Suffolk Rural Transport Grant Scheme



- ▶ The grants scheme was delivered in spring 2024.
- ▶ There were 6 grants available, each awarded for a specific 'area of operation'.
- ▶ Each grant offered was valued at up to £100,000.
- ▶ Transport operators - including commercial bus operators, community transport operators, private hire companies and taxi firms - were invited to apply over an 8 week application period.
- ▶ Applicants were able to apply for as many of the grants/areas of operation as desired

The Mid Suffolk Rural Transport Grant Scheme



Applicants were asked to demonstrate how they will achieve the following requirements of the grant funding:

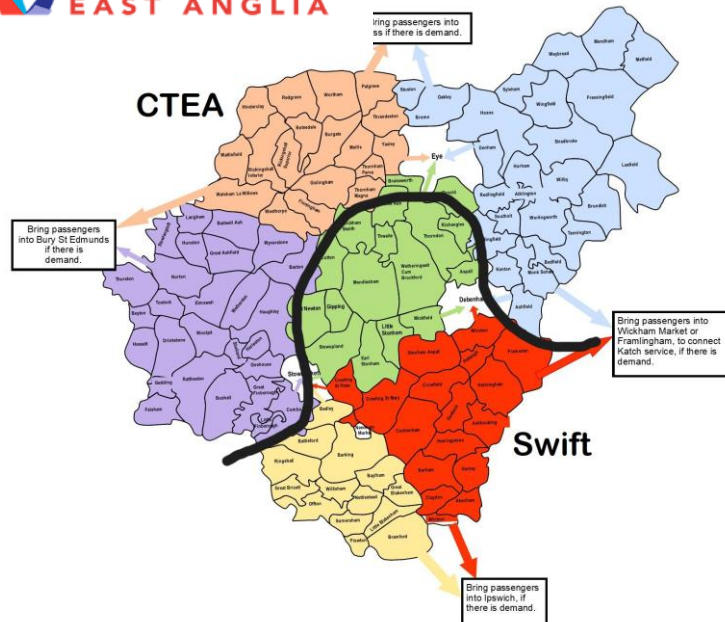
- ▶ Provide services accessible and cost-effective to all
- ▶ Provide services that offer fares in line with current passenger transport pricing
- ▶ Deliver provision at optimal times for those accessing work, education, healthcare, shops and services, and the evening economy – ideally operating from 7am to 11pm each day. Minimum hours of operations will be requested for each service, based on likely destinations of potential users.
- ▶ Connect people to onwards travel sustainable transport connections
- ▶ Deliver the provision in a the most environmentally sustainable way possible – for example, by trying to reduce dead mileage as much as possible, by using low carbon vehicles or biofuel if possible.
- ▶ With assistance from MSDC, work with partners to make the provision recognisable, integrated and joined-up
- ▶ With assistance from MSDC, promote the new services to local people
- ▶ Be able and willing to incorporate/'phase in' zero emission vehicles into their new routes, should the council be successful in securing funding for these vehicles in the future, or if the new routes demonstrate they are financially sustainable in the longer term
- ▶ Provide evidence and feedback to MSDC on the progress of the new provision, it's value for money and it's demonstrated social value and/or economic value within the locality.
- ▶ Provide an indication of how the service could be financially sustainable in the longer term, with consideration given to future proofing

Mid Suffolk: Rural Transport Grants Scheme

- ▶ We received 4 potentially suitable applications, with a few operators bidding for multiple areas.
- ▶ A funding awards panel - made up of county and district council officers working in passenger transport, and cross-party Mid Suffolk councillors – came together to assess applications with a judging criteria developed using the grant brief (with input from the Mid Suffolk Sustainable Travel Councillor working group and officers) and make recommendations on which applicants/proposals to award funding to.
- ▶ These recommendations (including more detail on each recommended proposal, and justification) were presented to cabinet for final approval.
- ▶ The successful grant recipients were Communities Together East Anglia (an established community transport operator) and Swift Taxi Cabs Ltd. (a small – although significant for our area! – taxi company), who are both based in and around Stowmarket, the district's largest town.



Mid Suffolk: Rural Transport Grants Scheme



- ▶ Both had applied for the maximum amount of grant funding available, to cover all of the areas – but the council’s decision to take forwards both applications, splitting the funding and areas of operation evenly between the two, reflected the desire to pilot to different delivery models with two very different providers.
- ▶ As a result, each of these organisations were awarded £300,000 to deliver their pilot schemes across three of the areas of operations - with Communities Together East Anglia taking the three areas in the north of the district and Swift Taxi Cabs Ltd. taking the three areas in the southern/central part of the district.
- ▶ Grant funding given upfront (given the nature of set-up costs), with claw-back caveat for any unspent funds in place within funding agreements should either party terminate the grant agreement.
- ▶ Operators were transferred their grant funding in August 2024, and following a few months of ‘mobilisation’ (establishing an identity and branding for the schemes, procuring vehicles, recruiting drivers, developing a back office/passenger booking system ect.), both schemes launched at the beginning of November 2024 – so we are currently 11 months into operations.
- ▶ The council is monitoring the grant funding/schemes for a period of two years. Including set up time, this means up until the end of August 2026.

The Resulting Schemes:

- ▶ The Maxi Suffolk Taxi Bus, operated by Swift Taxi Cabs provides scheduled timetables across fixed routes across central and south Mid Suffolk, utilising a fleet of four small ‘people carrier’ sized vehicles.
- ▶ There’s three routes available so far – Stowmarket Circular via Debenham on a Thursday, Stowmarket Circular via Thurston on a Tuesday and a Thursday, and Stowmarket Circular via Bacton on a Monday and Wednesday. The next route to be phased in is a Stowmarket circular via Wattisham on a Friday, and in the future there will also be a route operating between Debenham and Eye. Journeys cost a flat rate of £4, and taxi vouchers are accepted too. Customers can pay online when they book in advance (which is recommended), but are also welcome to hop on board at any stop along the route – space permitting and pay by cash, card or taxi voucher to the driver.
- ▶ Further details can be found on The Mid Suffolk Taxi Bus website, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X and Tik Tok channels.



The Resulting Schemes:

Launching Monday 4th November 2024
Stowmarket

Combs-Little Finborough-Great Finborough-Buxhall-Onehouse-Haughley-Shelland-Harleston-Rattlesden-Felsham-Deeding-Hessett-Drinkstone-Woolpit-Wetherden-Bacton-Emswell-Wyverstone-Beyton-Tostock-Norton-Thurston-Burton-Great Ashfield-Badwell-Ashi-Langham

Offering affordable transport solutions for residents of the above villages wanting to travel into Stowmarket for shopping, education, socialising, work, medical appointments or onward travel.

- Accessible, electric vehicle
- Small group travel
- Reducing loneliness and isolation
- 7am-7pm Monday-Saturday



01449 614271
bookings@communitiestogether-ea.org
www.communitiestogether-ea.org Registered charity: 1004988

Launching Monday 4th November 2024
Eye & Debenham

Metfield-Mendham-Weybread-Fressingfield-Laxfield-Styleham-Wingfield-Stradbroke-Brundish-Wilby-Norham-Rome-Oakley-Brome-Sutton-Denham-Reddingfield-Ashington-Southolt-Worthington-Tannington-Bedingfield-Bedfield-Kenton-Mork-Soham-Ashfield

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- ▶ Rural Connect is a fully demand responsive (door-to-door) community bus service operated by Communities Together East Anglia and provides transport services across north Mid Suffolk.
- ▶ It covers three geographical areas: Eye and Diss, Eye and Debenham, and Stowmarket – connecting people living in outlying villages with local towns and beyond. It uses two ‘people carrier’ sized vehicles, including one that is fully electric.
- ▶ Passengers register for the service, and then journey bookings can be made via phone or email up to two weeks in advance, and the fare price is as follows:
 - ▶ 1–4 miles: £4.00
 - ▶ 5–7 miles: £5.50
 - ▶ 8–10 miles: £8.00
 - ▶ 11–13 miles: £9.50
 - ▶ 14–16 miles: £12.00
 - ▶ 17–20 miles: £14.00
 - ▶ Over 20 miles: £16.50 plus £0.50 per additional mile

The Mid Suffolk Taxi Bus: Our Learning's so Far



- ▶ Despite a strong launch, branding, and lots of perceived interest it has been, and remains, difficult to convert this into passenger numbers
- ▶ There is a compromise between providing both timetable and geographical coverage – providing for a larger number of settlements increases total journey times along the whole route, and reduces the chances of more frequent services and having a longer timetable. Longer journey times may be an impediment for certain users of the service.
- ▶ Operationally; recruiting and retaining drivers, and working around driver absences (e.g. through sickness), has been a persistent challenge
- ▶ New commercial operator routes have emerged in competition with MSTB since launch. Whilst this is a positive thing, it has demonstrated the need/desire for the service to remain flexible.
- ▶ There were high start-up costs with the vehicles, branding, licencing and driver salaries. This has put more pressure on the operator to find ways to make the overall scheme financially viable. The operator has found 'match funding' income through providing school bus services, and transport partnerships with visitor economy destinations (e.g., Brewery Tour days out).

The Mid Suffolk Taxi Bus: Next Steps



- ▶ Consider the weigh-up of coverage versus route length and deliverability!
 - ▶ Shortening and/or combining two of the existing routes, removing any duplication with subsequent commercial bus operator routes, to make them more manageable and sustainable - provided that any changes are clearly evidence-led and utilise consultation and council-provided travel pattern data and intel.
- ▶ More and more (and more!) promotion to increase passenger uptake
- ▶ ...which will hopefully enable us to grow the timetables
- ▶ Explore options to improve resilience (e.g. shared driver pool, potential funding for an extra driver).

Rural Connect: our Learning's so far



- ▶ The fully demand responsive model (Rural Connect) appears more popular/well used, even in areas of overlap between the two services – but this could be a reflection of overall coverage so far and the established understanding/passenger base of traditional community transport operations.
- ▶ The most regular journey booked is less than 4 miles
- ▶ It has been a struggle to gain much multi-occupancy due to individuals booking journeys that cannot be paired up with others (despite scheduling efforts), although there are a few regular trips that capture a few people. Stowmarket to Needham, with a few pick ups on route, is a short route but at the moment proving to achieve multi-occupancy.

Rural Connect: Next Steps

- ▶ To establish whether there is enough demand for an evening and Sunday service, and implement this if there is, and evidence this if not.
- ▶ To look into potentially developing some flexible-scheduled routes – based on patterns observed in door-to-door requests so far, alongside feedback from community engagement and intel on commuter journeys that the economic development is able to provide.
 - ▶ Perhaps start this by advertising/promoting that Rural Connect is delivering transport to a certain ‘destination’ for a certain time on a certain day – not necessarily committing to a set route - and planning/scheduling the pick ups based on bookings.
- ▶ To navigate any licence changes required to accommodate any of the above.
- ▶ To increase promotion and awareness of the service

Thankyou for listening!



Further Reading:

- www.midsuffolk.gov.uk/rural-transport-grants-scheme
- www.midsuffolk.gov.uk/w/new-community-transport-services-to-better-connect-mid-suffolk
- www.communitiestogethereastanglia.org/community-transport
- www.suffolktaxibus.com

Further feedback or questions/queries most welcome at anytime:

Katherine Davies

Sustainable Travel Manager

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