Sub-national Transport Bodies: evaluation of initiatives to support local authority capacity and capability

Final Report

On behalf of the Department for Transport

transport for quality of life

UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER⌗

sustrans

UWE Bristol | University of the West of England

Citation

Disclaimer

Acknowledgements

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List of Abbreviations

CoE – Centre of Excellence

DfT – Department for Transport

DRT - Demand Responsive Transport

EEH – England's Economic Heartland

EV – Electric vehicle

LA – Local Authority, used in this document to include local transport authorities

LTA – Local Transport Authority

LTP – Local Transport Plan

MC – Midlands Connect

PT – Peninsula Transport

RCoE – Rural Centre of Excellence

SALC – Suffolk Association of Local Councils

STB – Sub-national Transport Body

QCR - Quantifying Carbon Reductions

TE – Transport East

TfN – Transport for the North

TfSE – Transport for the South East

UWE – University of the West of England

WG – Western Gateway

Executive summary

During 2021/22 the Department for Transport (DfT) made additional funding available to Sub-national Transport Bodies (STBs). The initial plan had been to allocate funds to STBs for spend within 2021/22 but it was subsequently agreed that this funding could also be used for project delivery during the 2022/23 financial year.

The funding was to enable STBs to support their local authorities (LAs) in delivering transport policies in four priority areas identified by DfT:

- Decarbonisation

- Bus service improvements

- Electric vehicle infrastructure

- LA capacity and capability

DfT invited STBs to submit proposals for funding, giving them an eight-week turnaround period. The process was not intended to be competitive and collaboration and co-ordination between STBs was encouraged. DfT allocated funds ranging from £12,000 to £300,000 to 25 projects led by six STBs. Most proposals involved multiple STBs.

UWE Bristol was commissioned to carry out a process evaluation of this initiative. The evaluation was undertaken in two phases:

- Phase 1 involved a review of the funding allocation process, to understand what worked well and less well and capture any lessons learned.

- Phase 2 involved an evaluation of five projects (henceforth referred to as 'case studies') selected from the 25 projects which were funded. This considered the project development process, delivery, early impacts, anticipated future benefits and perceived value for money.

Phase 1 involved interviews and focus groups with representatives of all STBs and DfT's policy and sponsorship teams. In Phase 2, the case-studies involved interviews, focus groups, and, for one case study, a survey of the LAs who would benefit from the work.

The Executive Summary now presents the key findings of the evaluation for Phase 1 followed by Phase 2. A final subsection then summarises the key recommendations.

Funding allocation process: key findings

The funding became available in the middle of the financial year. As a result, the time available to design and implement the funding allocation process was limited, which some participants believed had affected the quality and quantity of proposals. Specifically:

- Tight timescales made it challenging for STBs to develop high-quality proposals which were well-aligned with existing DfT-led policy initiatives.

- The design stage would have benefitted from more time for DfT to work with the STBs to increase effective alignment of their proposals with relevant policy initiatives, including the Bus Service Improvement Plan process, the EV charge-point delivery strategy and the development of Local Transport Plans.

- The initial requirement for delivery to be within the 2021/22 financial year constrained the number of proposals which STBs submitted. The proposals submitted were based on what could be procured and implemented quickly, as STBs were initially told that projects must be delivered by April 2022 (although this deadline was subsequently extended). One STB did not submit any proposals as they did not believe it was realistic to deliver within the timescales initially set.

- STBs' own processes for sign-off of proposals, agreeing internal resource and procurement needed more time than the DfT process allowed. As the STBs needed to put their proposals through internal approvals before submitting them to DfT, this limited the time STBs had to spend on developing them.

Communication and support were not evenly received by STBs:

- Some STBs worked more closely with DfT than others, in terms of developing their proposals through an iterative process.

- STBs reported different experiences of the relationship with their DfT Sponsorship Leads. Some reported receiving information directly that others heard indirectly, for example, information relating to indicative amounts of funding available, or changes in the deadline to which the money should be spent.

Capacity varied between the STBs but all reported capacity constraints, as the funding opportunity amounted to additional workload for staff and arrived at short notice:

- In all cases the STB staff involved had to develop proposals alongside existing workloads that were full.

- Some STBs had very limited capacity to write proposals and spend the money in-year. Some reported that with more time, they would have submitted other proposals.

- Successfully securing additional funding to take on a project without an increase in capacity to procure and manage these projects was considered challenging.

The STBs reported that they valued working collaboratively, rather than competitively:

- They saw the initiative as an opportunity to demonstrate how the STBs can work together to play a key role in supporting DfT policy priorities and providing a resource for LAs.

- Some could see the potential efficiencies in individual STBs developing expertise in a certain area and leading on this area on behalf of all the other STBs. However, to capitalise on this way of working, differences between STBs' own capabilities and capacities would need to be addressed.

- The three knowledge centre projects selected as case studies (Rural Centre of Excellence, Capability and Capacity Interventions to Accelerate LA Delivery, and Connected Mobility Hub) were collaborative in nature and contributed to hubs or centres of knowledge around specific topics (rural mobility, LTPs and bus ticketing) that could become a resource for LAs and help to bridge a capability gap. However, these were viewed as requiring ongoing funding to fulfil their potential.

Case-studies: key cross-cutting findings

Table 1 below shows the key features of the five case-studies selected.

Table 1: Key features of the five case studies

Name	Lead STB	Budget	Description
Decarbonisation Playbook	England's Economic Heartland	£300,000	Development of a tool to help LAs identify what actions they need to take to reach net zero
Rural Centre of Excellence	Transport East	£90,000	Development of a Centre of Excellence that would lead development of understanding of rural/coastal mobility challenges and support LAs and other STBs
Identifying a Cross-STB Network of Alternative Fuel Refuelling Sites for Freight	Midlands Connect	£102,000	Development of a site selection tool to help STBs identify a network of recharging/refuelling sites to support alternative fuels for freight
Capability and Capacity Interventions to Accelerate L A Delivery	Transport for the South East	£300,000	A programme of grant funding to LAs to undertake projects to accelerate delivery of their Local Transport Plans and related programmes
Connected Mobility Hub	Transport for the North	£60,000	Provision of additional specialist support (via consultants) to LAs to help them develop and deploy digital and ticketing initiatives at a local level.

The Decarbonisation Playbook and Alternative Fuels for Freight projects created tools for LAs to use. The others created knowledge centres or hubs.

Learning points

Learning points were identified from different organisations' perspectives.

For STBs

- Enabling other STBs to access existing procurement frameworks could reduce the administrative complexity of procuring joint STB projects.

- Collaborative projects with multiple partners take longer to deliver than single agency projects, and it is important to allow sufficient time to engage with partners at each stage of the project.

- If consultants are used, they need to be carefully and fully briefed and managed, so that they deliver relevant outputs that have a legacy greater than the immediate commission.

For others implementing similar projects – tool development

- Tools like the Decarbonisation Playbook offer useful practical support to LAs within the Centres of Excellence programme.

- For large, complicated projects, there may be benefits to sharing the project management function in the form of a cross-STB delivery team and sharing functions across more than one STB.

- For complex modelling projects it is important to consider data standards, legal protocols, commercial arrangements, risks and liabilities.

- Engagement with a full range of stakeholders and user groups can play a vital role in ensuring tools meet the needs of end-users.

- Project plans need to be flexible to accommodate the complexity of those projects.

For others implementing similar projects – Knowledge Hubs or Centres of Excellence

- Knowledge centres can offer useful support to LAs, but their outputs must remain practically relevant and how to access them must be well communicated.

- It may be more efficient for the STB to administer capability building projects such as training for multiple LAs rather than to outsource this to a particular LA.

- Sub-contracting work to consultants needs to be managed very carefully to ensure the work does not become too bespoke and not transferable, as funding bespoke sub-projects to support capability tends to have very limited transferable benefit to others across a region or beyond.

For DfT

- The interventions have revealed gaps in the existing evidence base on issues such as the effectiveness of decarbonisation interventions and workable solutions to rural mobility. DfT should consider how these gaps are addressed through future evaluation work.

- The STBs felt the process for engagement with DfT at the proposal development stage would have benefitted from more structure and better communication.

- Complex, collaborative modelling projects take time to set up and to deliver, so a flexible approach is sometimes required.

- Better, clearer guidance from the DfT at the outset of future calls for funding will help manage STBs' expectations and save time and resources.

Recommendations

Key recommendations identified for DfT are to:

- Reflect on the best ways to work with and support a varied group of STBs

- Standardise information flow to STBs from the Department

- Adopt schedules for funding applications which account for STB capacity constraints

In addition, recommendations for future collaboration were for:

- DfT, STBs and LAs to explore further opportunities for efficiencies, including the value of a greater role for STB-coordinated Centres of Excellence

- The STBs as a group to develop common procurement frameworks to facilitate collaboration amongst them

Structure of the report

The report begins with an introduction setting out the policy context and the rationale and objectives for this process evaluation. Chapter 2 provides some details on research methodology. Chapter 3 outlines the key findings from the evaluation of the funding allocation process (phase 1). Chapters 4 to 8 are each devoted to one of the five case study projects (phase 2). The report has been written in such a way that it is possible to delve into the detail of each specific case study as a standalone chapter. Each case study chapter covers:

- A project description
- Evaluation Method
- Findings in terms of:
    - Context and Proposal Development
    - Project Delivery
    - Emerging Impact
    - Anticipated Future Benefits
    - Finance and Perceptions of Value for Money
    - Conclusions and Learning

Chapter 9 then provides a cross-cutting analysis of key findings from across the case studies, and overarching conclusions, followed by recommendations.

1. Introduction

Sub-national Transport Bodies (STBs) provide strategic transport governance and coordination for regional consortia of English local authorities (LAs) outside London. Seven have been established since the Cities and Local Devolution Act 2016 made provision for their formation. The STBs comprise groupings of Local Transport Authorities (LTAs) and other partners (e.g. Local Enterprise Partnerships, DfT, Highways England, Chambers of Commerce). Only one STB, Transport for the North, is a statutory body. The other six STBs are at various stages of maturity in their pre-statutory status.

The seven STBs are:

- England's Economic Heartland (EEH)

- Midlands Connect (MC)

- Transport East (TE)

- Transport for the North (TfN)

- Transport for the South East (TfSE)

- Western Gateway (WG)

- Peninsula Transport (PT)

DfT provides funding to the STBs. Initially allocated for single years, the funding moved to a three-year settlement for each STB from 2022/23. During the 2021/22 financial year, DfT made additional funding available for STBs.

DfT policy leads set out four priority areas in which they invited proposals from STBs. This aimed to enable STBs to address LA capacity and capability (C&C) issues while supporting the delivery of key DfT policy objectives.

DfT wrote to STBs inviting them to submit proposals for funding, giving them an eight-week turnaround period. STBs were given an outline of what was in scope for each priority area, and some rules that proposals needed to follow. The four areas were as follows:

- **Decarbonisation -** helping the DfT and LAs to implement the commitments made in the Transport Decarbonisation Plan

- **Buses -** helping LAs to deliver on the commitments in the national bus strategy 'Bus Back Better' and to develop effective intra-regional bus networks

- **Electric Vehicle (EV) Infrastructure Strategy** - assisting LAs in the rollout of charging infrastructure, potentially through regional strategies

- **LA Capability and Capacity** - playing a role in building capability within resource constrained LAs, to help them in the planning and delivery of local transport

The process was not intended to be competitive, and collaboration and co-ordination between STBs was encouraged.

Each STB has a "sponsorship lead" within the DfT as a main point of contact. STBs that contacted DfT sponsorship leads during the proposal development phase (to seek clarification or request help with their proposals) were put in touch with the relevant policy team, who then engaged in iterative dialogue with them.

DfT allocated funds to 25 projects with individual budgets ranging from £12,000 to £300,000. The projects were led by six of the seven STBs. The initial intention was for the additional funding to be allocated to STBs and for all projects to be delivered within the financial year 2021/22. However, as the funds were allocated towards the end of the financial year, project delivery was not feasible in the initially anticipated timeframes. Therefore, project delivery was combined with STBs' existing workstreams for 2022/23, and most of the 25 projects supported through the additional funding also continued delivery into the 2023/24 financial year.

DfT commissioned the University of the West of England (UWE) to undertake a process evaluation to learn lessons from this initiative. Specifically, the evaluation sought:

1. To learn lessons from the process of allocating funding and working with STBs to develop proposals, to inform future collaborative working and funding allocation processes, and

2. To gather interim evidence on the perceived impact of five case study projects, to understand the extent to which these are meeting their policy objectives and enhancing the Capability & Capacity of STBs and LAs.

As the interventions were ongoing at the time of study, only initial assessments of the impacts and legacies of the funded projects could be made. Fuller assessments of projects' impact on LA Capability and Capacity could be the subject of future research.

2. Evaluation Methodology

The process evaluation had two phases. Phase 1 explored the process of allocating funding to STBs, with an emphasis on what worked well and less well and any lessons that could be learned to inform future funding allocation processes. Phase 2 aimed to gather lessons learned from project delivery and evidence of emerging impacts on STB and LA capability and capacity, focusing five purposively selected case study projects.

Following early consultation with DfT it was agreed that the evaluation should address the following overarching themes:

- How the STBs engage with each other and other partners, which factors facilitate this engagement and in which contexts it is most beneficial

- Early perceived impacts that the funded projects have had on STB and LA capability and capacity (based on the selected case study projects)

- Good practice for, or barriers to, engaging with LAs

As the interventions were ongoing at the time of study, only initial assessments of the impacts and anticipated future benefits of the funded projects could be made. These assessments are based on stakeholder views and qualitative perceptions of impact, rather than providing quantitative estimates of impact which could be directly attributed to the intervention.

2.1. Evaluation of Funding Allocation Process

The qualitative research for Phase 1 took place between May and August 2022, following the award of the funding in January 2022. Topic guides were developed in collaboration with DfT. The research comprised:

- 2 online focus groups: one with DfT policy leads, and one with DfT STB sponsorship leads

- 6 semi-structured online interviews with representatives of STBs

- 1 short written statement from an STB representative, who was unable to participate in an interview

Separate focus groups were conducted with the DfT policy and sponsorship leads to keep group sizes smaller to enable participation and to better capture role-specific perspectives.

The research aimed to capture all STBs' perspectives on the process and to understand decisions they took to submit or not submit proposals. All seven STBs were therefore contacted by email and invited to put forward participants for a semi-structured, online, face-to-face interview lasting up to 50 minutes. Six of the STBs put forward one or more representatives to be interviewed. Participants' job roles ranged from strategic leads to project leads. One STB that did not participate in the interviews explained briefly by email their approach to the process. That information has been included in the research findings.

2.2. Case-studies

Five case studies of funded projects implemented by different lead STBs were identified:

- Decarbonisation Playbook, led by England's Economic Heartland

- Rural Centre of Excellence (CoE), led by Transport East (TE)

- Identifying a Cross-STB Network of Alternative Fuel Refuelling Sites for Freight, led by Midlands Connect

- Capability and Capacity Interventions to Accelerate Local Authority (LA) Delivery, led by Transport for the South East

- Connected Mobility Hub, led by Transport for the North

The projects were purposively selected to include the four DfT policy themes of decarbonisation, buses, EV infrastructure strategy and LA capability and capacity. The sample also aimed to include a mix of different types of activities and different sizes of projects, as well as geographical spread across different lead STBs.

The University of the West of England (UWE) research team started regular engagement with the five project leads from May 2022 to co-develop proportionate monitoring and evaluation plans and to inform case-study design. As part of this work, a short monitoring and evaluation plan was established for each case study which detailed:

- Key contacts for the project

- A description of the project, including its aims, proposed activities, value, timeframe, dependences, intended users and impact and outcomes

- A set of core evaluation questions (relevant to all case studies) as well as project specific questions

- Potential evaluation challenges and how these could be mitigated

- Key milestones and potential monitoring indicators

- Proposed initial evaluation fieldwork (e.g. stakeholder interviews, focus groups, surveys) and the resources required

- Subsequent research opportunities, recognising that the initial fieldwork would be conducted before most projects were expected to deliver full outcomes and impacts

Once the monitoring and evaluation plans had been agreed, study tools (such as topic guides and questionnaires) were prepared for each case study and agreed with DfT.

The fieldwork was conducted during March and April 2023. Table 2 below sets out the key elements for each case study. Further detail about which stakeholders were engaged in each case study is provided in Chapters 4-8.

Table 2: Summary of the fieldwork undertaken for each case study

Project	Stakeholder interviews	Focus Groups	Surveys
Decarbonisation Playbook	9 interviews with 10 representatives	Not included	Not included
Rural Centre of Excellence	7 interviews with 9 representatives	With 5 representatives from the STB rural transport group	A survey of users (sent to 100, with 39 responses)
Alternative Fuel Refuelling Sites	4 interviews with 4 representatives	With 4 representatives of the other STBs involved	Not included
Capability and Capacity Interventions to Accelerate LA Delivery	7 interviews with 8 representatives	Not included	Not included
Digital Mobility Hub	5 interviews with 7 representatives	With 6 representatives from the LAs that that had been in receipt of support	Not included

In the case of the Rural CoE, a short survey was developed by UWE and the questions were sense-checked by TE. It was administered using Qualtrics and sent to people that had attended a workshop organised by the Rural CoE or had engaged with the Centre in some other way.

Interviews were recorded and automatically transcribed. A coding framework was developed to support the analysis process. This set out potential categories and themes (linked to the research questions and topic guides) under five key headings:

- Context and Proposal Development

- Project Delivery

- Emerging Impact

- Legacy

- Finance and Perceptions of Value for Money

The analysis included the following steps:

1. An initial review and coding of all the transcriptions associated with each case study (as per the coding framework),

2. A detailed review of all the transcriptions associated with each case study, drawing out the findings associated with the five themes above,

3. Preparation of narrative to summarise the key findings in relation to each theme and each case study,

4. Final review of transcripts to ensure all the key findings had been accounted for,

5. Addition of any wider contextual information/data from desk research, and

6. Finalisation of each case study chapter.

As part of the quality assurance process, the research team reviewed each other's chapters against the coding framework to ensure consistency of approach between the report's authors.

Finally, the five case study chapters were reviewed to identify similarities and differences. The study team met to discuss these to inform the synthesis of the case study findings reported in Chapter 9.

3. Findings from the Evaluation of the Funding Allocation Process

As introduced in the previous sections, an interim report on the funding allocation process was completed in January 2023. During 2021/22, funding was made available for Sub-national Transport Bodies (STBs) to bid for projects to support their constituent local authorities (LAs) in delivering transport policy objectives. STBs were encouraged to collaborate in bidding but needed to respond to four priority areas identified by the Department for Transport (DfT). In order to deliver the scheme, DfT officers launched a call for proposals to allocate funds to STBs for spend and delivery within the same financial year. In practice, the funding was agreed for the 2022/23 financial year. The next three sub-sections summarise the findings, lessons learnt and recommendations for similar future schemes.

3.1. Effectiveness of this model of allocating funding

All research participants acknowledged that this was the first time that within-year funds had become available, and so it was a new situation for everyone. Research participants highlighted several key areas for improvement. The timescales and ad hoc nature of the funding stream were the main challenges for STBs, who would have liked to have more advance warning and time to develop proposals.

Participants generally thought the process had brought forward a number of good proposals in a short timeframe. Both DfT and STB officers recognised that some of the proposals lent themselves to longer-term pieces of work, and that to be successful some projects will need continued investment beyond the additional funding. One of the DfT officers suggested it would have been better to take the time to align such projects with the STBs' overall business planning.

More regular, programmed funding would give STBs more certainty of what could be maintained beyond the within-year funding. However, one policy team member pointed out that the STBs had stepped up and provided good proposals at short notice and it was better that money was made available at short notice than not at all.

As one STB interviewee put it:

"They needed to get some money out of the door before the end of the financial year, otherwise they would lose it. And so, they had a good idea and they wanted to get it in the bank account of STBs to deliver on things that were their priorities. But let's not dress it up as anything more than it really was at the time. I think, if they like it as a model, if they said 'actually, you know it was a bit of an 'off-the-cuff' idea and we didn't really know where it was going to go, but it worked as a way of getting money out of the door..."

The assessment of one of the DfT interviewees perhaps best sums up the situation:

"Probably everyone here would agree that we wouldn't want to do this again – at least in the same way we did, but I think the good thing is that we did actually manage to get a substantial amount of additional funding out to STBs in a relatively

short amount of time. And we also managed to do so without any major handling issues".

3.2.   Lessons learnt

Tight timescales for delivery put pressure on the process, perhaps unnecessarily. The initially proposed schedule for spending the funding was very short, with proposals required to be delivered within the same financial year. This limited the number of proposals put forward, as some STBs did not propose projects if there would be insufficient time to spend these funds within year. Later in the proposal development process, it was communicated to STBs that spend could be rolled into the following year's settlement and workplan. If this decision had been communicated earlier, it would have allowed more time for proposal design and delivery, and potentially led to more proposals being put forward.

Communication between DfT and STBs should be equitable. Proactive contact by DfT to ensure all parties get the same information at the same time is important going forward.

Relationships with DfT sponsorship officers are key. This was important for connecting STB officers with the relevant DfT policy officers, or for providing advice regarding the size of projects that could be put forward and for ensuring changing contexts were communicated to STBs.

Having a good business plan is important. Where STB plans prioritised areas with already worked up, but not fully funded proposals this made it easier to agilely respond to the *ad hoc* invitation to bid for funds, as some of the preparatory work had already been done.

Collaboration between STBs was one of the main positive experiences coming from the process. One STB noted that this was a 'first' and should be built upon. Some STB participants thought that the process gave the DfT policy team some insights into how they might want to work with STBs in the future. However, the capacity of individual STBs to participate was noticeably varied and should be addressed.

Capacity is a big challenge at a sub-national and local level, more so than capability. While the two newest and most thinly resourced STBs did not have (significant) additional funds allocated, those that have received additional funding are also aware of the challenges of spending it, as one STB interviewee explained:

"So, we've got 25% more to deliver this year with the same size team and the same amount of resource. So that's going to be a challenge".

A clear message from STBs was that putting together proposals and procurement requires time that is additional to established workloads, which might already be full.

At the end of the process, five out of seven STBs received substantial sums to be rolled into the following year's workplan alongside the three-year settlement. More than one STB reflected on whether the process could have been rolled into the main three-year settlement conversations or could just have been 'an allocation' rather

than a bidding process, particularly when it became apparent that the funds could in fact be spent in the following year.

An important dilemma for policy stakeholders, including the DfT, is that both capacity and capability are needed to make effective funding bids, but capability and capacity are unevenly spread between STBs. This creates a risk of a spiral of success and decline which means the well-resourced STBs attract more funds and the poorly resourced STBs experience a relative decline.

3.3.   Recommendations for future similar schemes

Set realistic timescales for grant funding processes, considering the timing constraints of both central and local government procedures. If significant sums are made available at mid-year, consideration should be given up-front to the relative imperatives of "getting the money spent" in-year versus enabling a full range of good proposals to come forward.

Ensure equality of communication, information provision, and support to all parties throughout the bidding process, by proactively reaching out to all (potential) applicants.

Recognise that the STBs have sharp disparities in their own capabilities and capacities to prepare funding bids and carry out procurement to demanding timescales.

Be aware that it takes resource to successfully bid for funding - those with a good business plan, a pipeline of projects, and experience and capacity to write proposals are in a better position to secure funds than others who don't have these things in place, even though the less-resourced organisation might gain relatively more benefit from the funding.

4. Decarbonisation Playbook

4.1. Project Description

The England's Economic Heartland (EEH) Decarbonisation Playbook aimed to develop an interactive tool that would help local authorities (LAs) identify what actions they need to take to reach net zero. The project was led by EEH in partnership with Transport East (TE) and Transport for the South East (TfSE).

The EEH Decarbonisation Playbook was dependent on another DfT funded project, the Decarbonisation *Policy* Playbook. The Decarbonisation Policy Playbook was a joint project led by Midlands Connect (MC) and supported by EEH on behalf of all seven STBs to examine how the impact of policies and plans would vary depending on the nature of the location where they are applied. This included establishing a consistent approach to the application of a place-based typology which would take account of the nature of different places e.g. large city, market town, coastal community, rural area. The Decarbonisation Policy Playbook would also identify a long list of interventions and quantify the impact of these interventions in each type of locality.

The EEH Decarbonisation Playbook intended to utilise the data from the Decarbonisation Policy Playbook to provide a series of tools and outputs to LAs in the EEH, TE and TfSE areas.

With a project value of £300,000 the project activities included:

1. Diagnosing the type of place: assessing physical geography (e.g. urban/rural/coastal etc.), connectivity, and economic activity of a locality to identify what type of place it is.

2. Standardising transport carbon baselines across the three STBs to ensure that the tool used consistent assumptions and inputs that followed DfT guidance.

3. Developing a proforma that would auto-fill the same data for each of the LAs across the STB regions covered - highlighting possible interventions that meet national and regional trajectories and targets.

4. Developing a tool that would help LAs to identify what actions they need to take to reach net zero to support development of targeted policy interventions and rapid Local Transport Plan (LTP) development. The outputs of the tool were to include, but were not limited to:

   - A common carbon baseline (set in 2019) for each authority area across the three STB regions - giving each LA a robust carbon 'baseline' outlining the scale of emissions from transport, where they are occurring and the journeys that are causing them

   - A suite of interventions to meet the chosen pathway to net zero

   - A simple-to-use interface

5. Engaging with stakeholders – reaching out to council leaders and (transport/decarbonisation) portfolio holders to demonstrate the tool and help them appreciate the scale of their transport decarbonisation challenge.

The project was intended to align with and complement DfT's updated Local Transport Plan (LTP) guidance and Quantifying Carbon Reductions (QCR) guidance (neither of which had been published at the time that this evaluation was being carried out).

The project timeline was originally intended to run from May 2022 to April 2023, however delays meant that at the time of writing, the tool development phase was expected to be completed in the Autumn of 2023.

4.2. Evaluation Methodology

The fieldwork was conducted between March and April 2023 and included nine semi-structured interviews with:

- Representatives from the EEH project delivery team (two interviews)

- Representatives from DfT (two interviews with three representatives)

- Representatives from LAs (four interviews)

- A representative from Transport for the North (TfN) (due to their subsequent involvement in developing the tool)

4.3. Findings

Context and Proposal Development

EEH, with input from the STB decarbonisation group, was already aware of a need to better understand the anticipated impact of different types of interventions on place-based decarbonisation. This was emphasised when DfT's Transport Decarbonisation Plan (TDP) was published in September 2021. As well as setting ambitious targets for the decarbonisation of transport, the plan introduced a requirement for LAs to identify through their LTPs how they would contribute to achieving the decarbonisation targets.

Several research participants suggested that the national measures proposed in the plan would not be sufficient to reach the targets proposed and that (in their view) local authorities would have to play a key role in filling this gap. However, research participants felt that local authorities faced a number of challenges in being able to do this, which included:

- An evidence gap in terms of understanding the impact of potential local interventions

- Difficulties in being able to easily access the evidence that is available

- Insufficient capability to be able to quantify the potential impact of their plans

Therefore, research participants felt there was a need for further work to investigate and summarise the benefits of potential measures for local authorities to use in developing their LTPs.

Following the publication of the TDP, EEH had also started to receive feedback from its LAs which highlighted their need for support in understanding the carbon impact of potential interventions:

"I was in the room when local authorities were saying to EEH, 'we know in the near future there will be a requirement to update our LTPs and what is missing in these LTPs is an understanding of if we delivered x or y intervention, what difference that would make in terms of decarbonisation'" (STB Officer)

At the same time, EEH had started talking to other STB policy and decarbonisation leads to think about how, collectively, they could respond to the issue and build on an existing body of work. For instance, MC had developed an early version of their Decarbonisation Policy Playbook which enabled the user to work out what the likely emissions reductions were for different types of measures. However, whilst invaluable, this did not allow a user to understand the impact within the context of their geography. The proposed tool was therefore intended to provide a user interface to allow LAs to access this existing work and apply it to interventions in their own area. Similarly, the Royal Town Planning Institute and City Science had developed something similar and presented it to the EEH Board (which had been well received and helped provide political support for the emerging concept).

The three STBs agreed that a collective approach was required to develop a methodology which could be used on a consistent basis across different place types and avoid the development of competing approaches:

"We need to collectively do something like this, because if you shoot off that way and use this methodology and we do it another way with a different methodology, it's not going to solve the problem and you are going to end up with different sets of metrics in different localities of the UK" (STB Officer)

When the DfT announced that funding was available for decarbonisation work, the three STBs discussed the opportunity and divided up a number of collaborative projects between them. EEH, as the STB decarbonisation lead, was thought to be well placed to lead on the decarbonisation playbook.

As part of the process for developing the proposal, EEH tested their concept with LA partners (through both decarbonisation as well as transport officer groups) and received feedback that the approach would be valuable. They also engaged with DfT who agreed that the project aligned with a core theme and filled a recognised evidence gap. Similarly, they engaged with potential contractors to explore feasibility. This process of engagement, with a range of stakeholders, was considered a strength in the approach, although one research participant reflected that involving a wider group of STBs in the earliest stages of the project may have helped other STBs understand the potential benefits of becoming involved.

The interviews also explored the extent to which other options were considered in developing the proposal. In this instance, no other options for addressing the problem were considered. This was mainly because the concept was building on an existing body of work, a tool appeared to be the next logical step and the only way to

solve the problem. Equally, research participants reflected that there was insufficient time during the bidding process to undertake an options analysis.

In summary, the strengths of the proposal development process included:

- A collaborative approach to bidding across the STBs

- Engagement with a wide range of stakeholders (although one research participant indicated that involving a wider group of STBs at an earlier stage could have been helpful)

Had more time been available, wider stakeholder engagement may have been possible.

Project Delivery

The EEH team procured a contractor to deliver the playbook. At the time of the evaluation fieldwork (end of March 2023), considerable progress had been made and an early version was being shared with potential users for testing. This early version included the baseline data for EEH, TE and TfSE. The next stage was expected to involve the integration of baseline data for MC, Peninsula Transport and Western Gateway (who had subsequently expressed an interest in using the model) for further testing in July 2023, with the final version expected in autumn 2023.

Despite the delays, research participants were positive about the delivery process, reflecting that it benefitted from:

- **Good project management and organisation –** with effective engagement and governance structures and a process which focused on the needs of the end user.

- **A good relationship with the contractor** - who brought significant knowledge and expertise and presented decisions and their implications clearly. Their knowledge, gained through another contract relating to the development of the LTP guidance, was particularly helpful in ensuring that the Playbook would align with the LTP guidance when published.

- **Effective engagement with stakeholders** was achieved through a range of groups, including a user group (which included DfT, STBs and LAs), which was thought to be particularly important to ensure that the project met user needs. Research participants reflected that the team sought their opinion at critical points in the development process, which influenced the project's direction. Similarly, the involvement of DfT technical staff helped to ensure alignment with national activities as well as being a critical friend in the process. As such, the DfT staff often challenged the delivery team on aspects of the model's development or the data that was to be used. However, limited DfT capacity meant that this was not in place at the beginning.

- **A strong working relationship with other STBs** - including TfN and MC, who were working on projects that have provided data to feed into the Playbook. The fact that the project manager for the Playbook was also the co-sponsor of the related project run by MC was thought to be particularly beneficial.

"I think one of the things that has stood out to me has been the really good collaboration they've had with the other STBs… both in terms of accessing their data, as well as making it so that others can input and use the Playbook as well" (DfT Official)

- **A flexible and incremental approach** - which recognised that complex modelling projects do not always follow a simple trajectory and evolve and develop in a creative way which responds to issues and opportunities encountered during the process. The outcome-based approach to commissioning (where the tender documents set out the outcomes to be achieved, rather than prescriptive methods) and strong focus on meeting the needs of users were thought to be important factors in enabling this.

The project also faced a number of challenges, which included:

- **Lack of empirical data -** The project plan had assumed that empirical data relating to the carbon savings of different types of intervention would be readily available. However, after initial work, it became clear that this was not necessarily the case. The project therefore needed to take a different approach, and this involved working much more closely with MC and TfN to resolve gaps.

- **Evolving scope -** The original project plan also assumed that baseline data would be derived from 'top down' data published by DfT and applied to the local level. In practice this data did not give sufficient detail, so the team reinforced the data with a bottom-up approach using local transport models. This involved extra costs for the three STBs involved which have been met locally. Equally, the scope also expanded to include evidence from TfN's [Clean Mobility Vision](#) work. This provided a wider set of outcomes for the user (e.g. clean air, accessibility, air quality etc.) and a light touch guide as to the kinds of combinations of interventions that work well for a particular type of place. This work was used by the team to inform the reports generated for the LA users and to produce intervention collector-style cards that can be accessed in the tool. Whilst including this added some complexity to the development of the model, it was considered a valuable addition.

- **Understanding DfT's requirements for LAs** - Some research participants expressed a frustration that the DfT had not published its guidance on LTPs which meant that the team developing the tool would not have a clear understanding of these requirements. However, other research participants indicated that this was not the case, as the DfT had shared early drafts of the guidance with the team and the project benefitted from a contractor who was also working on the LTP guidance. Therefore, the team were confident that their Playbook would help LAs respond to the requirements when they are published. Nonetheless, the project team reflected that the fact that the guidance had not been published did make it harder for the user group to make informed decisions about how the tool should work.

Some research participants felt that the project delivery could have been improved by:

- **Involving a wider group of people -** to act in an advisory capacity, in particular people who had delivered similar projects before (e.g. academics).

- **A more structured approach to the engagement with DfT** - which allowed for better information sharing between the delivery team and DfT policy and technical teams. This was envisaged as a mechanism to support information sharing and regular contact in both directions, rather than the informal approach adopted.

- **Providing additional visualisation tools –** to help partners understand what the Playbook would look like, although other research participants felt that the team did this well, through using storyboards and early-stage outputs.

- **Improving communications to keep all partners informed** – particularly in terms of how issues raised at meetings had been addressed.

Emerging Impact

At the time of the evaluation fieldwork, the final version of the Playbook had not been issued, therefore research participants could not comment on actual benefits achieved. Instead, they were asked to identify what they expected the impact to be for LAs, STBs and the DfT.

For LAs

Whilst recognising the limitations of the Playbook, research participants believed that it had the potential to offer benefits to LAs in the following ways:

- **Supporting the delivery of their LTP and meeting QCR requirements –** Research participants anticipated that the Playbook could be used by authorities to calculate the carbon savings from a particular set of interventions, or it could be used to support the identification of proposed plans. The ability to be able to experiment with the tool was highlighted as a particular benefit and something which traditional transport models (commissioned by LAs) rarely offer. For instance, the user can select their LA and then select from a range of policy interventions (e.g. more cycle lanes, road charging) to see the impact of these interventions on their carbon trajectory. Several research participants also highlighted that there were no other resources available which allowed local authorities to do this.

- **Resource savings** – Research participants believed that the Playbook would save LAs money and time, as they would not have to commission consultants to develop complex models from scratch.

- **Evidence based policy making** – Several research participants reflected that the tool would help LAs to deliver policies that were based on better evidence and some highlighted opportunities for the tool to support the development of other policies (e.g. clean air strategies).

- **Addressing capability/capacity constraints** – Whilst research participants acknowledged that the tool would not increase the number of staff available to LAs, it would nonetheless free up resources, particularly in more resource-constrained authorities. One research participant highlighted that given the limited pool of people with transport modelling skills, the Playbook could provide a useful solution to this capacity challenge. Other research participants highlighted that the tool could help to improve understanding of decarbonisation measures and their potential benefits. The expected

accessibility of the tool was thought to be an important factor in helping people to engage with this agenda.

- **Communication and culture change** – Several research participants highlighted the importance of the Playbook in terms of communicating the scale of the decarbonisation challenge to elected members and others within the authority. Several participants anticipated that it could be used to help justify interventions and to make difficult decisions.

> *"They will be able to work with members and say 'this is the shape of what is happening in our part of the world. If we pull this lever, this lever and this lever, this is what it will do to carbon and they will be able to do that without running a transport model"* (STB research participant)

However, these benefits were, to some extent, conditional on the successful deployment of the Playbook and associated training. Research participants recognised that whilst a user guide is to be provided, user training is likely to be beneficial as users will be required to make choices in terms of the interventions selected and the intensity factor associated with each intervention (i.e. how hard each lever is pulled).

Several research participants also indicated that DfT's formal endorsement of the Playbook would be an important factor in driving use and therefore potential benefits.

For STBs

Research participants also felt that the tool offered potential benefits to STBs, both directly and indirectly. Whilst some research participants indicated that STBs could use the tool directly to inform their own regional policies, others suggested that STBs may wish to combine the results from their constituent LAs to better understand the scale of the 'policy gap' at a regional level. The consistent approach offered by the tool was considered an important factor in enabling STBs to combine findings. It was further suggested that this understanding could influence the role of STBs in the future:

> *"We will be able to look at the combination of national and local interventions to identify if there is a gap. This gap is likely to be where STBs may end up playing a bigger role"* (STB research participant)

For DfT

Several research participants also highlighted potential benefits for DfT. These included:

- **Consistency of reporting** – several research participants felt that it could offer DfT some assurance that, when used, the LTP in question would meet a minimum standard and make it easier for DfT to assess. It was also felt that if funding were to be linked to LTPs, that methodological consistency would be an important consideration. However, research participants also suggested that for this benefit to be maximised, the Playbook would need to be endorsed by the DfT.

- **Understanding the policy gap** – several research participants thought that use of the model to quantify the scale of carbon reductions from local interventions would most likely reveal a policy gap (i.e. that the combination of

national and local measures would not be sufficient to meet the net zero targets). This in turn could potentially be used by DfT to identify new national policies.

- **Policy development** – a small number of research participants highlighted that the evidence contained within the Playbook could be useful for the DfT in developing national policies (e.g. active travel).

"We have been talking with others at DfT who are quite interested in some of the emerging findings already and how they might use it in developing national policy" (DfT Official).

Anticipated future benefits

The contract for the delivery of the Playbook was written so that the intellectual property sits with the three lead STBs, not the consultancy team. Similarly, the Playbook is expected to be accompanied by a set of technical documents that would allow people with the relevant skills to be able to understand the design decisions and integrate new evidence in the future.

The expected output was described by the lead partners as a 'minimum viable product'. In other words, it worked, but represented an early stage of development, sufficient to demonstrate the concept. They recognised, therefore, that there is considerable room for further development of the Playbook, and they have committed to maintaining it initially. In the short term, the lead STBs hope that as the first iteration of the Playbook is issued to LAs within their areas, users will provide feedback which will enable further improvements. Several research participants also highlighted that as more rigorous data from evaluations becomes available, the underlying data within the Playbook could be updated. DfT were thought to have a key role in driving better quality evaluation data by requiring funded projects to collect robust evaluation data in a suitable format for use in the tool. One research participant suggested that future iterations of the Playbook could look to incorporate new data sources such as mobile phone data.

In the longer term, research participants hoped that the Playbook would become part of a suite of tools that all LAs could benefit from. Whilst the initial modelling incorporated baseline data for the 3 STB areas, it is understood that the Western Gateway and Peninsula STBs have also commissioned equivalent baseline data for their areas, and this is to be incorporated into the next version for testing in July 2023. Therefore, research participants reflected that the Playbook has the potential to be rolled out nationally.

One research participant noted that the Playbook's scope had diverged from the original plan to offer a means of accessing data held by MC. This led to a concern that the outputs may now diverge from the models being developed by MC and TfN. This issue was the subject of ongoing discussions between the STBs. It was recognised that whilst it may be problematic, it may also provide an opportunity for convergence. Research participants also expressed mixed views on whether the Playbook's use should be mandatory. Some suggested that it should be, to ensure consistent carbon reporting, but others suggested that if local authorities felt they had a better approach, they should be free to use alternatives.

Research participants also highlighted the need for ongoing training and support for potential users. There were different perspectives on the extent to which STBs should provide this. Whilst some research participants felt that STBs could help users to run the Playbook and produce outputs, others felt that the STBs should simply provide training.

Research participants felt that the Playbook had the potential to improve the relationship between STBs and their LAs by providing a practical tool (alongside others) which could provide tangible benefits to LAs.

"It has helped to improve our relationship with STBs because we are giving them a really practical operational tool" (STB officer)

"This sort of product adds value to the conversations we have with our local authorities" (STB officer)

Some also reflected that this was part of a wider transition for STBs from being a strategic organisation to one which offered greater operational support to local authorities by becoming Centres of Excellence. The Playbook was perceived as a tool which could help the STBs provide this and offer better value for money for local partners.

Research participants tended to agree that the approach could be applied to other areas which also offered opportunities for collaborative working:

"It has accelerated our thinking on other opportunities for things that could be looked at from the regional perspective" (Local Authority officer)

Finance and Perceptions of Value for Money

The project team reported that the DfT allocation had been spent, but due to its expanded scope, additional resources were required to support the enhanced baselining process. Local funding was used to meet this additional requirement.

In terms of value for money, research participants felt that the project offered good value to the public purse as by coordinating the work amongst STBs, LAs would not have to commission the work separately.

"It will ultimately save local authorities a lot of money, hopefully as they won't have to re-invent the wheel" (DfT Official)

One research participant suggested that building a baseline for an LA would probably cost that LA approximately £50,000. Therefore, there were significant savings from commissioning the joint baseline across 34 authorities, and further efficiency savings from the joint work to model the carbon savings.

However, some local authorities also suggested that whilst they expected the Playbook to be useful in helping them to identify the best interventions for their area, they also believed that it may still be necessary to commission their own transport modelling.

"I think it will reduce the amount we ask of them (consultants) but it's not going to remove the need for them entirely" (LA research participant).

Conclusions and Learning

The project was intended to provide a practical tool to help LAs develop their LTPs and identify interventions to support decarbonisation in their area. Research participants were optimistic that the final version would do this and provide a consistent approach to a common problem. In the longer term, research participants hoped that the Playbook would become part of a suite of tools that all LAs could benefit from.

Research participants were positive about the delivery process, highlighting that it benefitted from robust project management processes as well as good engagement with other stakeholders and STBs. However, the project was complex and became more so as the project progressed, and the team identified additional opportunities to add functionality. The most significant challenge, however, was that expected data inputs were not available or did not exist. The project's flexible and incremental approach was an important factor in navigating its various challenges.

Therefore, learning points have been derived from a mixture of both positive and negative experiences:

Learning for EEH and its partners

- Tools like the Decarbonisation Playbook offer useful practical support to LAs within the Centres of Excellence programme.

Learning for others looking to implement similar projects

- Engagement of a range of stakeholders and user groups can play a vital role in ensuring tools meet the needs of end-users.

- Complex modelling projects do not always follow a simple trajectory and often benefit from a flexible and incremental approach. The project plan needs to allow for this.

- Having experienced significant data challenges, some research participants suggested that it would have been beneficial to have a more rigorous review of potential data sources and availability at the project planning stage.

Learning for DfT

- Modelling projects, where there is a desire for a consistent approach, offer a natural opportunity for collaboration across STBs.

- The project demonstrated how STBs can perform a practical role supporting LA delivery.

- The project has revealed large gaps in the evidence about the effectiveness of decarbonisation interventions. DfT should consider how these gaps are addressed through future evaluation work.

- Engagement with DfT could have benefited from a more structured approach (particularly early in the project) with better two-way communication, rather than the informal approach adopted.

5. Rural Centre of Excellence

5.1. Project Description

Led by Transport East (TE) in partnership with local authorities (LAs), the private sector, and academia, the project aimed to develop a Centre of Excellence (CoE) that would lead understanding of rural and coastal mobility challenges and provide the expertise to support LAs and other STBs.

With a project value of £90,000, the project planned three phases of activity:

1. Programme development:

   o Establishing a Rural Mobility Task Force to scope the programme

   o Preparing a costed 2-year programme of work

   o Sending a survey to the 1,200 parish councils across the Transport East area to create a baseline of how people currently use different modes of transport across the region

   o Reviewing the literature on rural mobility

2. Establish good practice:

   o Identifying innovative and technology-based measures to support rural communities

   o Creating an online repository of good practice for rural transport projects drawing from national (and where necessary international) examples

   o Providing data and analysis to inform the programme of work

   o Documenting rural mobility challenges to inform the development of rural mobility strategies

3. Engagement:

   o Hosting dissemination events to share research findings

   o Stimulating discussion and informing LAs within the region and other STBs about the future work of the CoE

   o Engaging the private sector on the development of technology solutions linked to the publication of a Rural Mobility Strategy

   o Informing the national STB rural work programme

The project started in April 2022 with the aim of establishing the CoE by April 2023. As the initial events to share and disseminate research findings were scheduled for early 2023, there was very little time for the impact of the CoE to be determined at the time of carrying out fieldwork. This chapter aims to describe what had happened by that point, including emerging and expected impacts. Further evidence on the impact of the CoE could be gathered at a later date.

5.2.   Evaluation Methodology

The fieldwork was conducted between March and April 2023. It included a survey that was designed by the University of the West of England (UWE) and sent to 100 people who had engaged with the CoE (39 responded), a focus group discussion with five members of the STB Rural Transport Group and interviews with a further nine stakeholders. The participants included:

- People who had attended a workshop or engaged in some other way with the CoE (survey)

- STB Rural Transport Group (five members in a focus group)

- Representatives from the project delivery team

- Representatives from the DfT

- Representatives from LAs

- Representatives from other stakeholders (Sizewell C, Suffolk Association of Local Councils - SALC, Active Norfolk, Sport England, academics, Sustrans and other third sector organisations)

5.3.   Findings

Context and Proposal Development

The vision for a rural CoE was to develop a body of evidence that could be used to make the case for the investment and transport policies needed to address health and socio-economic inequalities, and decarbonisation, in a rural context.

The TE region is predominantly rural with a long coastline as well as some districts that sit within the M25. Whilst the latter might be seen as urban, parish councils in that area reported through the survey that access to rural areas is a key concern. For example, rural bus frequency is seen as insufficient.

One of the themes of the TE strategy is to energise rural and coastal communities. TE was already the STB lead for rural mobility and chairs a working group of officers from the other STBs. Therefore, TE was well placed to host a rural CoE and additionally there was support from the MPs in the region.

Only a few of the research participants for this study had been engaged in the project inception. Those that were engaged reported that the rural CoE concept emerged from a need to apply DfT policies effectively in rural contexts. Examples of these policies are the National Bus Strategy and addressing the specific connectivity problems found in rural areas.

During the proposal development it was felt that LAs were aware of some of the local transport issues, but that other sources of information on rural transport needs were also required. Therefore, it was decided to conduct a survey with parish councils to build a better local evidence base.

Project Delivery

The TE team conducted a rural access survey with its 1,200 parish councils to establish a baseline of rural mobility behaviours across the region. 372 parishes responded in full, thanks in part to the support of organisations like the SALC, a membership organisation that represents 97% of town and parish councils in Suffolk. SALC acted as a bridge between TE and the parishes and encouraged their members to complete the survey to ensure that grassroots input informed the development of the CoE.

TE also ran topic-based workshops to bring stakeholders together, one of which examined active travel, and the other the social value of community rural transport and how to improve it.

Research participants that had engaged with the CoE reported contributing the following to the CoE evidence base: case studies, local contextualisation, examples of funding challenges, ideas for rural transport solutions, a sub-regional study report on rural transport and an evidence base report on regional and national demand responsive transport (DRT) pilots.

Stakeholders were positive about the delivery process, reflecting that it benefitted from:

- **A good project management team** – The delivery team and project manager were very approachable and were ready and willing to share information about the CoE when requested. TE provided good, well-structured updates to stakeholders.

- **Effective recruitment** – finding someone with the right skills to lead the further development of the outline proposal was reported as having been key to project delivery. The successful candidate was very familiar with the context and had very strong networking skills. The long recruitment process limited the time available for delivery, as the project could not be taken forward without a lead in place. However, this saved money on salary costs, which was used on project activities instead.

- **A suitable academic partner** - The delivery team reported that Hertfordshire University provided academic support by undertaking a literature review.

- **Good engagement with both stakeholders and beneficiaries** – SALC and the delivery team reported that the survey with parish councils was particularly important in ensuring that the CoE was designed to address user needs by providing a better understanding of what facilities were available at the parish level and the transport concerns related to accessing essential facilities. The survey helped address the data gap that was identified by creating a regional evidence base. Stakeholder engagement has been enhanced by reaching beyond traditional stakeholders to include others such as Housing Associations, that may have a role to play in creating good rural transport.

"I wasn't aware of anybody who'd actually gone direct to the parishes and got a bottom-up perspective." (delivery team member)

- **A good working relationship with other STBs** – During proposal development Midlands Connect (MC) played an important role as another

STB with significant expertise on rural transport issues. Once the project lead was in place, the STB Rural Transport Group became a useful sounding board during project delivery. The delivery team expected that the group would continue to help the CoE in future by sharing its work and creating connections with the work of others.

The CoE also faced challenges, including:

- **Length of time taken to recruit a project lead.**

- **Understanding DfT's requirements for LTPs** - Some research participants expressed a frustration that the DfT had not published its guidance on LTPs, but the CoE was still highlighting rural transport issues and good practice to LAs that could be included in their LTPs.

Some research participants felt that the project delivery could have been improved by:

- **A more structured approach to the engagement with DfT** allowing for better information sharing in both directions. The delivery team felt that the project would have benefitted from having a DfT member embedded in their team rather than a DfT policy contact working alongside them.

- **Improving communications to keep all partners informed** – There was a marked difference in the way stakeholders described communications. While some spoke positively, other LA officers felt that communication between the CoE and the organisations they represented was poor. They felt that they were missing out on information that the CoE held on rural transport that their LA should have been benefiting from. Even those that participated in some workshops thought that the link with the CoE could have been more explicit. It was sometimes difficult for stakeholders to distinguish between the CoE, other work of TE and other initiatives linked to themes such as decarbonisation.

Emerging Impact

At the time of the evaluation the rural CoE had only just been established and so some research participants could not comment on actual benefits achieved. Instead, these research participants were asked to identify what they expected the impact to be for LAs, STBs and the DfT.

For LAs

Research participants believed that the CoE had the potential to offer benefits to LAs in the following ways:

- **Supporting the delivery of their LTP** – Going into the next financial year, the continuing work of the CoE was expected to be predominantly supporting LAs as they develop the next version of their LTPs. The CoE reported plans to hold four workshops both in person and online to help LAs identify where the cross-cutting theme of rural transport could be better addressed in their policy development. The information that has been collated and gathered by the CoE was expected to provide useful resources for LAs.

- **Access to resources describing what works in a rural context** - One tangible benefit of the CoE has been bringing diverse stakeholders together to

identify the challenges and barriers to transport in rural areas and gather case studies of good practice as identified by academics at Hertfordshire University. These case studies of good practice, such as for DRT, have been documented in an online data repository.

- **Collaboration and sharing good practice** – Part of the project plan was to facilitate the sharing of good practice in rural transport beyond the TE area. The sharing of what has worked well and not so well should lead to efficiencies in rural transport and more collaborative working between the LAs.

"There must be other rural authorities that have equally the same situations… linking up STBs across the country might be another opportunity to just see what's out there and what's being done in different places. If there is some sort of conduit to allow best practice to be shared, I think that would be brilliant." (LA officer)

- **Resource savings** - Research participants believed that an effective Rural CoE would benefit them by saving them time and money, by making evidence easily available to them in a single place and reducing the need to arrange meetings. LAs appreciated support with strategic thinking so that they could address the practical application of policies, thereby saving resources. The CoE also has the potential to help resource the LAs that need it most, recognising that the resources available to LAs are not equal. The CoE should help ensure that resources are not wasted on multiple parallel pieces of work.

"We've realised that there are a lot of people doing very similar things in different areas and that often they're quite isolated and siloed. Having the Centre of Excellence kind of being a bit of a coordinator of projects or being a bit of a signpost to things that are going on means that you avoid some duplication. It means there's a bit of a central point of contact for establishing new pilot schemes and when groups are trying to set things up." (Private sector stakeholder)

- **Evidence based policy making** – Several research participants reflected that the CoE would help LAs to deliver policies that address rural transport issues that are grounded in better evidence.

- **Addressing capability/capacity constraints** – Whilst research participants acknowledged that that the online repository of good practice for rural transport would not increase the number of staff available to LAs, it would nonetheless free up resources, particularly in more resource constrained authorities.

TE hosted two workshops for local authorities, including districts, to share research findings, stimulate discussion and to inform the future work of the CoE, one on Active and Rural Travel and the other on the Value of Rural Transport. A survey of attendees revealed that the top three emerging benefits were:

1. Improved understanding of rural transport challenges,
2. Improved understanding of rural transport solutions, and
3. Networking with others that are concerned about rural transport.

The survey findings were supported by comments in the interviews:

"Providing sustainable rural transport is challenging and the RCoE is proving to be an excellent vehicle to help connect and inform a wide range of organisations that have a stake in delivering it." (Local Authority officer)

Other benefits reported in the survey of people that had engaged with the CoE were:

- Opportunities to collaborate
- Receiving tools that help me in my job

Apart from the workshops, LA officers have also engaged the CoE about specific projects and themes including rural transport policy, buses (DRT and enhanced bus partnerships), electric vehicles, and active travel environments. The most reported benefits were:

- Opportunities to discuss collaborative working
- Opportunities to better understand rural transport solutions

Other reported benefits included:

- Better understanding of TE's role in the region
- An opportunity to raise local transport issues
- Acquiring technical information to support role responsibilities

Overall, those that attended the workshops or have had other engagement with the CoE reported that they had found it helpful (92% of survey respondents). Most also reported that following the engagement they were in a better position to develop plans or implement changes. Most said that they had already applied what they had learnt (63%), but some reported that they had not yet had an opportunity to do so (18%), or that they did not learn anything (18%).

For STBs

Research participants in the interviews and focus groups felt that the CoE offered potential benefits to STBs by:

- **Bringing clarity to the STB role** - Setting up and establishing the CoE has made it clearer to stakeholders what the STB remit is. STBs such as TE can influence and act on behalf of LAs, districts, and parishes, but they are not a transport operator. Engagement with the CoE has helped set expectations as to what TE can and cannot do.

- **Highlighting the challenge of addressing rural transport issues** - For example, how to make active travel improvements in urban settings with relatively short journey lengths is well understood, but in the rural context the distances between the origins and destinations of journeys tend to be greater. This role of the CoE is relevant for other parts of the country with similar rural geographies and not only the East of England.

- **Finding cross-border solutions** – People do not only travel or access services in their local areas, especially if they live on the border of an LA. There is a hope that the CoE will have a broader perspective so that it

becomes easier to address these cross-border issues when creating rural transport services.

- **Having an advocate for rural issues** –This advocacy role could have influence at different levels. A specific example given by the delivery team was data collected by the CoE being used as evidence presented to the Transport Select Committee.

- **Exchanging knowledge** - As well as access to the CoE resources on the website, sharing of good practice for rural transport takes place on a regular basis as part of the STB Rural Transport Group. The CoE was only recently established at the time of the research, but discussions had already taken place with Peninsula Transport (PT), Western Gateway (WG) and Transport for Wales. These discussions were useful both for sharing information and learning about the different approaches each is taking in rural transport.

- **Avoiding duplication** - STBs can help to avoid duplication and reported that they were pleased to use or adapt resources that the CoE had developed. An example was the parish and town council survey on rural mobility which the members of the STB Rural Transport Group had asked if they could adapt for use in their own regions.

- **Speaking with one voice on rural transport issues** – A member of the delivery team suggested that there is power in speaking with a collective voice across England on rural transport issues. It was felt that the CoE could help to do that well and that the evidence base would help make the case for adequate funding for rural transport.

For DfT

Several research participants also highlighted potential benefits for DfT. These included:

- **Lessons for setting up other CoEs** – Lessons can be learned from setting up the TE Rural CoE which can inform the DfT on how CoEs for other topics could be established. Any new CoE should consider the importance of collecting data to establish or to update a baseline for the work (as exemplified by TE's parish survey for the rural CoE). TE hold data on the finance that may be required both for set-up and on-going running costs and the requirements for multi-year funding. TE have identified the challenges of what a CoE can and cannot do, how long start up takes and the links to other workstreams such as decarbonisation and housing. Key suggestions from TE would be to set up with two or three dedicated staff and to consider potential secondments from the DfT policy team to both bridge gaps during recruitment and to improve collaboration.

"It was kind of fortuitous because we were thinking about capacity and capability and centres of excellence, and I think somewhere along the line the two conversations merged and so it almost became like a sort of unofficial official pilot [for Centres of Excellence], and there was a great amount of interest actually from policy teams to see if we could maybe start cracking some of the rural issues." (DfT officer)

- **Understanding the differences between urban and rural contexts** – The CoE can help provide the DfT with a more localised and detailed understanding of some of the policy and funding requirements for a rural setting. Solutions established for urban areas may not work in rural areas and the CoE can provide grass roots evidence of the mobility challenges in rural areas.

- **Time saving and efficiency** – Better coordination among STBs and LAs should help avoid duplication of work and create efficiencies, thereby saving time for the DfT. A rural CoE should be able to identify where the rural transport problems lie and where support and funding can best be targeted.

- **Communication channel for rural transport** – The CoE can make communications around rural transport more manageable. The STB Rural Transport Group could serve as a forum for more STB-DfT dialogue.

Anticipated future benefits

The success of the CoE needs to be measured over multiple years. The delivery of other TE workstreams mentioned below will help the project to be sustained beyond the DfT funding. There are a lot of crossovers between the CoE and on-going work that focuses on Bus Service Improvement Plans and Enhanced Partnerships, electric vehicle charging infrastructure, rail improvements in the region and active travel. The CoE provides an evidence base that highlights the rural transport issues and potential solutions for each of these workstreams in the rural context.

TE and the rural CoE were to be funded going forward through a combination of DfT grant funding and LA subscriptions. The scope of work will continue to be set out in the TE annual business plan. The project delivery team report that if the CoE can deliver products that are useful to LAs and that make officers' work easier, it will continue to have their support. LAs will benefit from products that consider the distinctive features of rural areas (as they differ from urban areas), backed by evidence.

The CoE was planning to continue a programme of workshops building on the two that took place in the 2022/23 financial year. Topics had been identified and built into the 2023/24 financial year business plans.

Finance and Perceptions of Value for Money

The project team reported that the DfT allocation had been spent and the project was on budget and on time. They felt that the additional grant funding has added value to the STB and existing work streams. The funding was used in several ways: to launch the CoE, fund a post, buy in consultant time, to survey parish councils, conduct a literature review and build an evidence base on rural transport which is now available to stakeholders.

There is an expectation from LAs that the work conducted will save them money in the longer term. As the CoE can take a regional or even national lead on rural transport issues, LAs expect to have better collective bargaining power when dealing with the private sector. For example, in principle it should result in cheaper and more suitable contracts with commercial providers for DRT.

The CoE may also be able to assist LAs to secure funding for rural transport by signposting funding that could be available as well as providing support to secure it. This includes access to match funding from community partnerships. Evidence from the CoE could help LAs to pitch for funds.

> *"We expect the Centre of Excellence to help in creating a better evidence base so that, you know, funding cases in the future can be better supported by sharing examples from all around."* (member of STB Rural Transport Group)

The project delivery team felt that consideration needs to be given to longer term funding, as without additional funding beyond the current financial year, the CoE would begin to struggle. Some funding has been built into current business plans, but without extra funding what is possible remains quite limited. There is scope to work across multiple largely rural regions, including WG and PT, but that requires funding to be developed that is independent of TE local plans. MC also received funding for rural transport, so it is important that this work is joined-up and optimised. Several research participants stated that they were not clear what the DfT's objective was in funding both. It was unclear to them whether the aim was to compare approaches, or whether multiple centres of excellence are fine as long as there is coordination. The delivery team reported that a working relationship between the two had been maintained and at an officer level this was working well.

The CoE had been taking the opportunity to raise rural mobility issues by having speakers at conferences such as the Transport Practitioners' Meeting (held in Greenwich in 2023). They felt they were making the most of the opportunities to share their work and raise interest.

Conclusions and Learning

Generally, research participants were positive about their engagement with the project, or at least its potential benefits. A few research participants felt that they did not know enough about the CoE, but they were still very positive about the engagement that they had had (such as attendance at a workshop). The interviews suggested that sometimes TE branding was very low key and so it was possible to engage with the CoE without realising it. Research participants explained that it was important for challenges, potential solutions, and the funding needs of rural transport to be highlighted and supported by an evidence base. The CoE was seen as a way of doing this. The delivery team recognised that rural mobility is inherently difficult to support. The parish survey demonstrated that rural areas and their mobility needs are very diverse. The literature review identified rural good practice from around the UK and beyond, but the CoE made it clear that context is critical and potential solutions are not expected to work in every rural situation. Learning points have been derived from a mixture of both positive and negative experiences:

Learning for TE and its partners

- The rural CoE offers useful support to LAs, but its outputs must remain practically relevant and access to them must be well communicated.

Learning for others looking to establish a Centre of Excellence

- Engagement of a range of stakeholders, including parish and town councils as well as LAs, can play a vital role in evidence gathering and ensuring that good practice is based on a range of real-life experiences.

- Recruitment of a suitably qualified lead takes a considerable amount of time which should be allowed for in schedule planning.

- The DfT's approach to CoEs should be clarified as it is currently unclear to STBs what the best model is and, for example, whether each CoE should have their own unique subject area, or whether having multiple CoEs for a single subject such as rural transport has merit.

Learning for DfT

- The TE project has revealed gaps in the evidence about rural transport and its link with issues such as health inequalities, socio-economic inequalities and decarbonisation. DfT should consider how these gaps are considered in future policies and funding.

- Engagement with DfT could have benefitted from a more structured approach with better two-way communication, for example by having a DfT member embedded on STB teams rather than a DfT policy contact working alongside them.

6. Alternative Fuels for Freight

6.1.   Project Description

Prior to the project examined in this chapter, over a two-year period starting in 2019, Midlands Connect (MC) conducted a study to explore opportunities and barriers to alternative fuels for freight and logistics.

That earlier project included modelling work in two phases:

- Phase 1 identified a network of potential re-fuelling/recharging stations that could be required in 2040 to ensure that HGVs are able to recharge/refuel using alternative energy sources

- Phase 2 developed a tool to rank sites identified in Phase 1 for their current suitability and readiness for infrastructure development

The Alternative Fuels for Freight joint STB project aimed to evolve the tool already developed by MC to encompass new criteria and repeat the ranking process across six STB geographies. Therefore, the tool was intended to enable each STB to devise a deliverable plan to develop a network of recharging and refuelling stations to support the switch to low carbon energy sources and achieve net zero targets for freight.

MC led on the work in collaboration with Western Gateway (WG), Peninsula Transport (PT), England's Economic Heartland (EEH), Transport for the South East (TfSE) and Transport East (TE). Transport for the North (TfN) decided not to join the partnership as they felt the project would replicate work they were already doing.

As the project sought to develop a consistent methodology across the six STBs involved, the other five STBs needed to complete the equivalent of Phase 1 of MC's predecessor project before the new study could commence. This work was funded separately to the project being discussed here, but nonetheless was an integral part of the process. The DfT-funded project evaluated in this chapter included two main activities which were known as Phase 2:

- Further development of the MC site selection tool to:
    - Integrate the data from the other STBs
    - Enhance the site selection tool
    - Use the site selection tool to create a shortlist of sites that could be developed with the least amount of disruption to existing infrastructure and where demand is highest

- Test the identified network of recharging and refuelling sites using the GB freight model to inform the assessment of likely future demand for the potential sites and identify a list of hub locations across England

The project had a value of £102,000 and was originally intended to be complete by April 2023. However, due to delays, at the time of the evaluation fieldwork some

project elements were still to be completed (expected between March and June 2023).

6.2. Evaluation Methodology

The fieldwork was conducted between March and April 2023 and included a focus group with the five collaborating STBs and four interviews with:

- Representatives from the MC project delivery team (2 interviews)

- A representative from DfT

- A representative from the contractor

6.3. Findings

Context and Proposal Development

MC decided to undertake their original study (carried out from 2019 to 2021) following a carbon baselining activity which highlighted the importance of tackling emissions from freight vehicles, as well as an emerging need for local partners to plan good access to land and energy:

"Our baselining activity showed that the movement of heavy goods around the region is one of the really difficult challenges around solving climate change" (STB delivery team member)

"In our business planning process in 2018, partners were asking what was going to be done in relation to alternative fuels, particularly the freight sector as it was perceived to be a gap" (STB delivery team member)

The team were also responding to emerging government plans to phase out the sale of diesel HGVs by 2040 as well as policy to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions from the transport sector.

The original study (2021) involved collaboration with partners, businesses and the haulage sector to investigate:

- The planning, location and scale of costs of future refuelling and recharging infrastructure

- Which alternative fuels were likely to be adopted industry-wide

- How better collaboration between the public and private sectors could remove barriers to uptake of alternative fuels

The research found that a key challenge to the adoption of alternative fuels was the availability of infrastructure. This was described in the study as:

"a vicious cycle where a lack of recharging/refuelling infrastructure is resulting in limited vehicle take-up and vice-versa. We need the public sector to intervene, 'break the cycle' and inspire confidence and certainty for businesses".

The original study (2021) was shared with DfT and was well received. As a result, MC was encouraged to play a co-ordinating role in progressing the uptake of alternative fuels for freight across the STB network, as well as exploring how the site selection tool could be rolled out nationally.

The findings of the study and the site selection tool were presented at a joint STB meeting and there was a lot of interest in the tool.

"We presented at meetings with all the STBs present and they said 'we would like something like that" (Delivery team member)

It was then agreed that a single piece of work was needed to further enhance the tool and integrate the data for the other STBs. When the additional funding from DfT became available it was perceived as an opportunity to take forward the Alternative Fuels for Freight project in a collaborative way.

The proposal development phase was led by MC, with little input from the other STBs. In part, this reflected the relatively short time period for developing the bid, but some STB research participants also observed that they did not have the capacity and capability to provide meaningful comment at that stage and that MC's expertise and leading role in this area was beneficial. One team member also reflected that there was no time to engage with the consultancy market to explore how much it would cost to deliver the project or potential approaches. Had this been possible they could have been more confident in their costings (although in practice the costs actually incurred were in line with expectations).

Project Delivery

The project involved the following elements:

1. **Oversight of the Phase 1 work for the other STBs** - As the Phase 2 work was dependent on the other STBs delivering Phase 1, the MC team also oversaw the delivery of Phase 1 on behalf of the other STBs. This was to ensure consistency of approach. The Phase 1 work was delivered by a contractor under two contracts (one held by WG and PT STBs and one held by MC on behalf of EEH, TE and TfSE).

2. **Delivery of Phase 2** - The original plan was to deliver each phase sequentially, but delays in delivering Phase 1 meant that the team needed to identify ways to start working on Phase 2 in parallel. As a result, at the time of the evaluation fieldwork, the team had produced an initial version of the tool. This version was designed to test functionality and included the planned enhancements as well as the Phase 1 data for MC, WG and PT STBs. The Phase 2 work was delivered by the same contractor under a contract with MC.

3. **Final integration of data** - The Phase 1 data for the remaining STBs and the GB freight model was to be integrated later.

4. **Transfer to an online platform** - Finally, once the tool development had been finalised as a Microsoft Excel prototype it was intended that it would be transferred to an online platform for wider distribution and use.

Despite the delays, participants were positive about the delivery process, reflecting that it benefitted from:

- **A consistent approach and oversight** - the coordination role played by MC in managing both Phase 1 and Phase 2 activities was thought to be very beneficial in ensuring a consistent methodology and outputs.

- **The previous expertise of both the STB delivery team and the contractor** - as both the STB delivery team and contractor had been involved in delivering the original project (2021), they were able to bring this expertise to the process.

- **Regular communication and strong project management processes** - the team had weekly project meetings between the client and the contractor, and the project stages had clear milestones.

- **A strong focus on the data standards and formats** – including the development of a data architecture and data management systems which ensured the data within the tool was compatible with DfT and other STB models and allowed the tool to be easily updatable and scalable.

- **Consideration of legal risks and their mitigation –** the team were aware that there were limitations to the data and the modelling process and did not wish to give users a false sense of accuracy. As the identification of site(s) for potential development could have implications for land value, this was identified as a potential legal risk to the accountable body (WMCA). This risk was mitigated by 1) identifying zones/rather than sites for development; 2) putting in place legal terms and conditions of use which protected the accountable body as well as other parties (e.g. commercial data providers).

The project also had several challenges. The first and most significant was the **delay in commissioning and completing the Phase 1 work for the other STBs**. This meant that the data was not available for integration within the tool and the delays also led to some capacity issues for the contractor. The delays were caused by the need to get five STBs to agree the scope of work and, as the project spanned more than one STB, **procurement also proved to be difficult.** The procurement issues came about because the STBs did not have access to the same frameworks which meant that MC had to act as the lead client on behalf of EEH, TE and TfSE for the delivery of the Phase 1 work. As a result of this experience, MC are already looking at how other STBs can access their consultancy procurement frameworks.

A further issue **was the need to respond to the differing need of STBs**. Each STB had a slightly different set of priorities which meant that the development of the tool was being pushed/pulled in different ways. For example, the Phase 1 work tended to show a shorter list of potential sites in more rural STBs and research participants highlighted that this could be problematic when presenting results to politicians:

"We took an early version of the Phase 1 work to our board, and they were very keen on it. However, they flagged up that there were gaps in the network, and this almost inevitably happens when you show a map to politicians, they jump to the conclusion that there is nothing in their area" (STB Officer)

However, this was overcome by:

- Adding a function which allowed a user to add a new site – which research participants thought was useful

- A flexible approach to the classification of:

  o Super hubs (long haul, and of national importance)

  o Strategic hubs (shorter-haul and of regional importance) and

  o Local hubs (last mile delivery)

On the other hand, the delivery team also suggested that whilst STBs were given many opportunities to engage with the process at key decision points, they did not always engage. The reason for this lack of engagement was thought to be a mixture of capacity and capability. The delivery team reflected that colleagues in other STBs often had a range of other commitments and therefore sometimes had insufficient capacity to engage. In addition, as highlighted previously, not all STBs felt they were able to make meaningful contributions to some of the more technical discussions and were content to let MC lead.

Finally, from a technical perspective, the project also had to **carefully manage commercial relationships**. The team recognised that some of the data input into the tool are commercially owned and not freely available. The STB therefore had to use its collective buying power to negotiate the use of this data in such a way that respected the business model of the data owner (including the development of terms and conditions for users) as well as securing a fair price for the taxpayer.

Some research participants felt that the project delivery could have been improved by:

- **More time to deliver the project** – recognising that ideally the Phase 1 work needed to be completed before the Phase 2 work could begin.

- **The involvement of Transport for the North (TfN) from the start** – whilst TfN were not part of the original consortium, they subsequently expressed an interest in the tool. Some research participants suggested that it may have been helpful for them to have been involved from the beginning and suggested that DfT could have done more to encourage TfN to be part of the project from the outset.

- **A more involved scoping process –** some research participants reflected that a face-to-face meeting to scope out the project would have been beneficial, and this would have also benefitted from DfT involvement.

- **The establishment of a cross-STB delivery team –** one research participant also reflected that the project management function was the role of one individual who also had other responsibilities. The establishment of a cross-STB delivery team or co-ordinating group may have been beneficial and improved the project's resilience.

Emerging Impact

At the time of the evaluation, the final version of the tool had not been issued, therefore research participants could not comment on actual benefits achieved. Instead, they were asked to identify what they expected the impact to be for LAs, STBs and the DfT.

For LAs

Whilst research participants recognised that the tool's geographical scale was better suited to understanding the national and regional picture, they nonetheless believed that it would offer benefits to LAs in the following ways:

- **Providing an evidence-based decision-making tool –** research participants felt that the tool could help LAs to make decisions on the location of alternative fuel infrastructure by enabling evidence-based, rather than political, discussions. As well as identifying suitable sites, the ability to understand why a site may not be suitable (such as grid constraints) was also thought to be beneficial.

- **Supporting local transport plan (LTP) and local plan development –** research participants felt that the tool would form part of the evidence base for the development of LTPs and help LAs to prioritise what infrastructure would be included within these. Furthermore, the evidence could also inform land use planning work as it was recognised that the infrastructure requirements to support these alternative fuel facilities may be of a significant scale.

- **Ensuring a holistic approach to the identification of sites -** as the research took a cross-boundary approach across six STB areas, research participants reflected that the tool provided a more realistic assessment of the potential market than if STBs or LAs had undertaken the research individually (as the market is not constrained by local/regional boundaries). For this reason, it is hoped that the tool will help to avoid unnecessary competition from sites being located too close together. Research participants also suggested that, in their experience, this sort of evidence can help to improve collaboration between LAs, as organisations are supported to take a holistic view.

- **Addressing capability/capacity constraints -** whilst research participants acknowledged that the tool would not increase the number of staff available to LAs, it would nonetheless free up resources, which would be particularly beneficial in authorities with the greatest resource constraints.

- **Resource savings -** research participants believed that the tool would save LAs money and time, as they would not have to commission consultants or pay staff to undertake the research. The co-ordinated nature of the work across six STBs was thought to have prevented a duplication of effort at a local level.

Whilst LAs were not included in the fieldwork for this research, the delivery team and STB research participants both indicated that LAs were supportive of the work and looking forward to being able to access the results. Discussions with LAs about their use of the tool is a potential area for future research.

For STBs

Many of the benefits identified for STBs were similar to those identified for LAs, but on a larger scale. For instance, the tool is expected to help STBs to be able to **identify suitable sites** in their areas and prioritise them, whilst **minimising unnecessary competition** with neighbouring areas. Similarly, by undertaking the

work at the level of six STBs the process was thought to **reduce duplication of effort**.

However, the most significant benefit is expected to be in helping STBs to **identify and take forward the development of a network of alternative fuel recharging/refuelling sites** and ultimately **accelerating the transition to net zero**. STB research participants felt that the site selection tool would help them to identify the best places for potential sites and provide them with **evidence which they could use to engage with the private sector and other stakeholders**. However, as the tool had not been finalised at the time of the evaluation fieldwork, they could not confirm that it would definitely do this.

They recognised that their role in taking forward any potential sites would be in **bringing together relevant partners and facilitating conversations**, rather than direct development. This was described by some as "phase three" and STB research participants expressed a desire to **maintain momentum** and build on the early work conducted by MC in taking forward **two superhub (**long haul, and of national importance) demonstrators, one at East Midlands Airport (connected with a Freeport) and one around Birmingham airport (connected with an HS2 site and the National Exhibition Centre). Having identified these sites in their original study (2021), MC has since been engaging with a range of partners (including the private sector) to explore the development of these sites. This work is now progressing to the development of **strategic outline business cases**. Furthermore, the original work has supported MC to engage with wider stakeholders such as gas and electricity network providers.

Whilst this subsequent development work was outside the scope of the funding, research participants from other STBs viewed it as a further opportunity for **knowledge sharing**:

"I know Midlands Connect have started doing this sort of work, so I am looking to borrow what we can from their approach" (STB Officer)

In addition, research participants also identified a number of other benefits that were specific to STBs. These included:

- **Provision of a bespoke reference case -** giving all six participating STBs the Great Britain Freight reference case (under licence) tailored to the needs of their area to inform the development of their strategic transport plans.

- **Evidence to inform wider strategy development work -** STBs highlighted that the evidence from the project would help to inform the development of strategies and plans relating to freight, connectivity, alternative fuels and coach travel.

- **Adding value to partnerships -** STB research participants felt that the tool would add value to the conversations they were having with the freight industry through emerging freight forums.

"Having the evidence of where things are needed demonstrates that we are thinking about demand and the needs and the requirements of the logistics industry" (STB Officer)

"It shows that we are taking freight seriously" (STB Officer)

- **Supporting co-ordination -** STB research participants suggested that the tool would be particularly useful in supporting co-ordination with other agencies such as National Highways (in terms of the provision of freight rest stops) as well as other stakeholders:

> *"I think it has the potential to be used to co-ordinate across multiple organisations and will ensure the infrastructure is in the right place"* (STB Officer)

Research participants ultimately hoped that the tool would support practical delivery of alternative fuel refuelling sites for freight and accelerate the transition to net zero.

For DfT

Several research participants also highlighted potential benefits for DfT. These included:

- **A prioritised map of the best sites for alternative fuel for freight recharging sites –** research participants reflected that this would provide DfT with a holistic view across six STBs which could help to prioritise investment. The fact that the tool used a consistent methodology across this area was thought to be particularly beneficial.

- **Evidence to inform the freight strategy -** the delivery team highlighted how the research would provide additional evidence to support the development of the national freight strategy:

> *"It has created a first draft of a national freight network, which is the future of the freight strategy"* (STB delivery team member)

- **Improving understanding of decarbonisation** - research participants suggested that the tool would help DfT to better understand the infrastructure required to support freight decarbonisation.

- **Highlight gaps in evidence** - some research participants indicated that the functionality of the tool would highlight potential gaps in the evidence base which DfT could aim to address.

Anticipated future benefits

The tool has been created with a number of features to enable its further development and use. These include:

- **Alignment with the Common Analytical Framework (CAF) -** the tool has been designed to enable it to become part of the CAF. The CAF is a suite of data and software tools that provide a consistent approach to data, modelling and appraisal across travel modes. Developed by TfN with the aim of improving the quality and consistency of modelling and appraisal across the region, the CAF is now being made available for all STBs to use. As a result, MC have a branch from the CAF called the Midlands Analytical Framework, which the Alternative Fuels for Freight tool has been designed to sit within.

- **A data dictionary -** which clearly identifies the data sources and their update schedules to allow users and any future developers to update the data or indeed replace the data with better alternatives in the future.

Delivery team research participants expect that the tool will continue to evolve and that once Version 1.0 has been published, future iterations would be developed in a shorter period of time than this first version.

Research participants were keen for the tool to be rolled-out and utilised across the UK and some felt that the DfT had a role to play in endorsing the final version to encourage take-up and use. The delivery team were also in discussions with TfN and the devolved administrations (in particular, Transport for Wales) which, if successful, could provide an opportunity for a **Great Britain wide roll-out**. One STB research participant suggested that as the tool is further developed, the team could explore wider opportunities for alignment with other organisations working in this space, such as the Connected Places Catapult and National Highways, thus ensuring that the tool becomes the model of choice for all.

Research participants felt that the tool and other collaborative projects had the potential to improve the relationship between STBs and their LAs by helping the STBs provide greater value to LAs.

And similarly, projects like this were felt to offer an opportunity to provide support on a consistent basis to LAs with differing levels of capacity.

Finance and Perceptions of Value for Money

The project team reported that they expected the DfT allocation to have been spent by the end of May 2023. One research participant highlighted that the fact that the MC team managed the relationship with the other five STBs (including organising meetings and co-ordinating responses), rather than the consultancy team performing this function, helped to keep costs down.

Most study participants felt that the project had offered good value for money due to its collaborative approach, which meant that STBs shared the development costs and enabled the project to offer economies of scale.

Furthermore, several STB research participants reflected that the project also had the potential to add value to other STB workstreams (such as developing the EV charging work for all road users).

Conclusions and Learning

The project was intended to provide a practical tool to help STBs to identify and take forward the development of a network of alternative fuel/recharging sites and ultimately accelerate the transition to net zero. Research participants were optimistic that the site selection tool would help them to identify the best places for potential sites and provide them with evidence which they could use to engage with the private sector and other stakeholders.

Research participants were also positive about the delivery process, highlighting that it benefitted from a consistent approach and oversight across the different phases of activity and a strong focus on data standards and format. However, the delays in commissioning studies on which the project's progress was dependent and the need to respond to the differing needs of STBs both affected the project's timetable.

Therefore, learning points have been derived from a mixture of both positive and negative experiences:

Learning for Midlands Connect and its partners

- For large, complicated projects, there may be benefits to sharing the project management function in the form of a cross-STB delivery team and sharing functions across more than one STB.

- Enabling other STBs to access existing procurement frameworks could streamline the procurement of joint STB projects.

Learning for others looking to implement similar projects

- Collaborative projects take time to deliver, and it is important to allow sufficient time to engage with partners at each stage of the project.

- For complex modelling projects it is important to consider data standards, legal protocols, commercial arrangements, risks and liabilities.

- Flexible, creative approaches to the functionality of the model can help to manage differing partner requirements (e.g. the inclusion of the function to allow users to add potential sites into the model).

- Consider whether there are other partners who could add value to the project (for example, in this case National Highways and the Connected Places Catapult were identified as having that potential).

Learning for DfT

- Co-ordinated approaches across STBs can be successful and bring a range of benefits including consistent results and cost efficiencies. DfT may wish to consider how it could have encouraged all STBs to take part at the outset.

- Complex, collaborative modelling projects take time to deliver, therefore the project plan and funder expectations should be realistic.

7. Capability and Capacity Interventions to Accelerate Local Authority Delivery

7.1. Project Description

The project aimed to support local authorities (LA) in the accelerated delivery of their Local Transport Plans (LTPs) and related existing programmes.

The budget was £300,000. Of this, £250,000 was allocated to LAs and £50,000 was spent centrally and on support from consultants. The project consisted of two stages:

1. **Expressions of interest** – Transport for the South East (TfSE) conducted a workshop with thirteen out of sixteen LAs. They also carried out a short survey to understand what LA support was needed with their LTPs and what possible solutions might be. Thirteen funding ideas were received from LAs. These were developed into proposals that were assessed by consultants against prioritisation criteria.

2. **Delivery of Support** – Grant funding was allocated to five successful projects. Some of the unsuccessful bids were identified as suitable for possible funding in future by a proposed Centre of Excellence. Monitoring and evaluation of outputs and outcomes was required of all funded projects. A series of technical project reports were to be produced for knowledge sharing. As well as the funded LAs directly addressing some of their capability gaps through the funding, they were all expected to share their findings widely across other LAs.

The five funded sub-projects are briefly described here:

1. Wokingham - Allocated £30,000 to appoint a marketing company to help their Communications Team to create public engagement content with them (for example how to market changes to cycling infrastructure to highlight their benefits for residents and encourage use) and to share lessons learnt with other LAs. The project was particularly aimed at harder-to-reach groups that are missed by the existing social media work carried out by Wokingham's Smarter Travel Team.

2. Solent - Allocated £102,000 to develop the Solent Regional Transport Model (SRTM) through: a) a scoping study to understand the requirements for future modelling; b) an update of the model reference cases to help with future business case development. Solent Transport covers four authorities: Hampshire County Council, Portsmouth City Council, Southampton City Council and the Isle of Wight Council.

3. Brighton - Allocated £40,000 to conduct training exercises centred on strategic transport modelling and support to explore transport options across the region, and commissioning communications and consultation review with workshops for officers to understand more about best practice.

4. Kent - Allocated £18,000 to pay for places on training courses aimed at helping LAs across the south-east to improve their capability in managing

carbon, particularly in the capital projects that are delivered. This was intended to bring the capability of the whole region up to a similar standard in terms of carbon training and knowledge. The courses offered were:

- o The British Standards Institution (BSI) two-hour on-demand course delivered online - Road to Net Zero: Terminology and Principles

- o The Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) one-day course delivered online – Carbon Management in Infrastructure.

5. Hampshire (HCC) - Allocated £60,000 to create a set of shared standard guidance documents for all LAs. Initially this involved HCC creating development and master planning guidance. The second stage was to identify what further guidance was required, develop that guidance, and then to work with the districts and boroughs to improve the integration between land use planning and transport planning.

The funded projects above did not directly involve any other STBs. Upon completion of Stages 1 and 2, the outputs will contribute to work to establish a Regional Centre of Excellence (RCoE), although the RCoE falls outside the scope of the funding examined by this evaluation study.

7.2. Evaluation Methodology

The fieldwork was conducted between March and April 2023 and included interviews with eight representatives (one of whom represented two different LAs) from:

- the Transport for the South East delivery team

- the DfT

- the consultants

- the five LAs that received funding

7.3. Findings

Context and Proposal Development

TfSE responded to the opportunity to bid for capability and capacity support funding by putting forward a bid to the DfT that they developed with their LAs. In subsequent discussions with the DfT the bid was amended to focus on capability and not capacity and was resubmitted. £300,000 was awarded in February 2022.

Project Delivery

TfSE ran a tender process to select consultants to conduct a call for proposals from its LAs and assess the submissions against criteria. These included the need to deliver the solutions within the prescribed timescales, how useful they would be for LTP development, and how broadly beneficial the solutions would be across the region. Five proposals were selected and funded which were managed by five LAs. Another nine were identified as proposals to be developed for future funding as part of a future RCoE.

Research participants reported that the process was robust and evidence-based, with input from a wide range of stakeholders. The biggest challenge was quick turn arounds and timings governed by the schedule of board meetings and the approval processes.

The expression of interest stage was divided into two phases. The first phase was about understanding the LA capability needs in the south-east and identifying solutions to improve them. TfSE prepared a list of skills that are important for transport planners. The list was used as the basis for a workshop to elicit any gaps that they had missed, which in turn informed a survey. A combination of the survey and interviews was used to confirm important skill areas and current levels of capability.

TfSE explained the project to their Board, and once the members realised that there was funding for their LAs they helped move the process along. The Senior Officer Group (Heads of Service and Directors of Transport) helped their officers to identify work streams that could support the development of their LTPs.

> *"Senior level buy-in at both board and senior officer level was really important"*
> (Delivery team member)

Phase 1 failed to provide the fully worked up proposals that the delivery team had expected, but it did produce ideas for potential projects to address capability gaps. From the perspective of the LAs, they did not receive enough guidance to provide detailed proposals.

In the second phase the consultants managed an assessment of the initial proposals and identified which ones had scored most highly against the assessment criteria. The top five projects were selected for funding. It became apparent that the LAs had not fully appreciated that they would be responsible for delivering the projects rather than TfSE, and so LAs were given the opportunity to work up fuller proposals of how they would deliver them. The consultant worked with these five LAs to develop their ideas into more robust proposals that set out what the project aimed to do and how it would help develop capability across the region.

The chosen projects were more focused on capability, but the survey and interviews in the first phase found that capability and capacity were very much intertwined. Some LAs were disappointed that the funding was not going to be helping with capacity:

> *"It's a good place to start, but I think there does need to be further work around capacity as well. Also, capacity is sometimes used as an excuse: 'we haven't got enough people', but actually sometimes that's not the only answer."* (Consultant)

Delivery of this project came at a time when LAs were delivering other major pieces of work, such as BSIP development, which caused the STB delivery team to consider how to simplify the process for LAs. This partially explains the mixed response of LAs in terms of how they perceived this process. What emerged was an iterative approach to developing the proposals. The proposals which came out of the survey in Phase 1 were not robust enough, but they were further developed in Phase 2.

> *"If we were to do it again, there might be a slightly different approach, but I think because this was the first time we had a project of this nature, it was, it was definitely*

a learning experience. If we were to do it again, we would definitely be able to refine it and improve the approach." (Project delivery team member)

Research participants generally felt that the process for selecting the funded solutions was effective, fair, and transparent. The consultants developed an assessment methodology that rated the proposals using weighted criteria which LA officers and the delivery team reported were applied objectively. The LAs and other stakeholders seemed satisfied with the result. The STB officers reported that the LAs which were not funded accepted that this was because they were not in a position to deliver in the timeframe, and that their proposals could be further developed and held in reserve for future funding opportunities in subsequent financial years. Of the thirteen LAs that took part in the initial workshop, nine went on to participate in the survey. This resulted in thirteen funding ideas from eight of the nine LAs that participated in the survey.

At each step of the delivery process, checks and balances were built in. The Senior Officer Group which represents the LAs provided a communication channel with TfSE and the consultants. Additionally, meetings were held separately with the DfT and the TfSE Partnership Board to present the findings of both stages of the project. These meetings were also used to present the proposed approach and the process and to seek approval to proceed. At each stage these stakeholders gave their support, and approved funding to proceed to the next stage.

Reflecting on whether the delivery model was the right one, there were mixed feelings among the research participants as to whether a competitive internal bidding process was the best approach or whether it would have been better for TfSE to have managed the funded solutions directly. The strengths identified were:

- **Support from senior leaders across the LAs** – The STB project delivery team considered that high-level support from both the TfSE Board and senior officers in the LAs was very important in endorsing the process and encouraging LA officers to engage.

- **Flexible approach** - Flexibility was appreciated by the TfSE delivery team as they engaged with the DfT and were given advice and space to amend their request for funding.

- **Informal process** – The perceptions of the LA officers that engaged were very varied. Those that perceived this as a bidding process felt that, compared with other bids, the work was not onerous. However, others did not understand that they were bidding and felt that the process lacked transparency.

"It takes a lot of the pressure off, being a little less formal, and you know it was more like you might get some money as opposed to you know there's £200,000 available and you must bid for it." (LA officer)

"It wasn't like normally when we work with DfT, with quite strict criteria and how much we can expect to get. There was nothing like that." (LA officer)

However, the following weaknesses were also mentioned:

- **Process failed to fund the smaller, less well-resourced LAs** – Engagement in the internal bidding process was largely limited to the bigger and better resourced LAs.

"Bidding for money is sometimes problematic in that it's quite time consuming and, if you're not successful, that's capacity that you could use for something else." (LA officer)

- **Funding criteria were not fully followed** – The highest weighted criterion for funding was that the proposals had to have a benefit for the region, not just a single LA. However, while this was clear in the Kent-funded solution (training for all LAs) which delivered a lot of benefit across the region, the others were quite bespoke, and the wider benefits were less obvious.

"The criticism perhaps I have is of the way in which the decisions were made and the criteria on which the decisions were made. When we saw the bids and those that were successful, it was clear that some of those bids didn't benefit directly all of the constituent members, so it felt as though some authorities had been given funding that really was just going to benefit them and their specific interest". (LA officer)

- **TfSE could have held the funding centrally** – For some funding solutions, particularly administering online training (Kent), it would have been more efficient for TfSE to have kept the funding. With hindsight both TfSE and LA officers agree that there was no benefit to Kent hosting it and TfSE was better placed to perform this role.

"We actually ended up organising the 64 officers going to the four courses and then also sending out the course materials and diarising the appointments. So, I think actually for us to hold the finances, it might have made it a bit easier." (STB delivery team member)

Some specific issues were reported by research participants about the delivery of the five sub-projects awarded to LAs:

1. Wokingham - The amount of time required for procurement of materials meant that the **time for project delivery was compressed**. As much of the promotional material that was used is branded with 'My Journey' (a local travel awareness campaign) it has **limited value for other LAs**

2. Solent - **procurement took longer than expected** and so implementation was not to start until the 2023/24 financial year

3. Brighton – one of the strategic transport modelling training courses was very detailed and complex. It had been intended that materials would be shared for wider benefit on the Regional Centre of Excellence repository, but **some technical materials are not easily self-accessible** without significant support

4. Kent – **some LAs have staggered the use of the training for their officers** so that when a refresher is required, they will have other spaces available. They have suggested that other officers use these later in the year so that the LA capability increases and to help embed the learning in the longer term

5. Hampshire - **procurement took longer than expected** and so the procurement was the only thing completed by the end of financial year 2022/23

Emerging Impact

For LAs

At the time of the study, impact was emerging from all five sub-projects. LA officers and the delivery team reported the following:

- Wokingham - the cycle campaign was not planned to take place until the 2023/24 financial year, but the proposed metrics for success were: a) a shift in attitudes marked by getting more positive comments in future consultations such as the LTP consultation scheduled for Summer 2023; b) the number of people using active travel as measured by council monitoring: c) newsletter sign ups, website, and social media analytics; d) recognition of the 'My Journey' brand (originally used in Southampton for active travel, but now being adopted by others in the South East).

- Solent – the project was to give the Solent authorities access to the sub-regional transport model that they need to assess their projects. TfSE was to decide if this approach was a suitable model which could be rolled out across the region. A further development reported was that the University of Southampton had agreed to work with the contractors selected by Solent to enhance the emerging models, creating a **strong industry and academic link.** This relationship was expected to both improve the outputs and help to build local capability.

- Brighton - The training helped officers significantly increase their strategic transport modelling knowledge and capability in preparation for the emerging (fifth) LTP. The funding enabled different teams amongst the Council's officers (public transport, engineering, policy, planning and regeneration) to apply the model to their work. The communications, consultation and engagement aspect of the project brought 40 to 50 colleagues together in a virtual room and helped to build relationships across projects, contexts and funding pots. The LA leads expect that the project will help officers use more consistent terms, materials, methods, and stakeholder lists. It was expected this would make communications clearer for both officers and the public and better prepare officers when communicating more controversial topics.

- Kent - the decarbonisation training has helped the 16 LAs and 14 districts and boroughs across the south-east region prepare to deliver quantifiable carbon reduction (QCR) projects. The STB project delivery team said that TfSE would need to support LAs and the training had assisted, even though it was not then known when to expect the QCR guidance or how it was to be applied.

- Hampshire – This sub-project was expected to accelerate the delivery of local transport plans and business cases. The LTP agenda had changed quite fundamentally. This project considered how to deliver against the new agenda and so promised clear benefits.

The main benefit for LAs was expected to be capability support in the accelerated delivery of their Local Transport Plans (LTPs). However, LAs reported that their **LTP**

development was being delayed by having to wait for the expected DfT guidance. Some of the research participants representing different projects indicated how their solution would help improve the quality of the LTPs, but perhaps not speed up their delivery. The modelling projects in Brighton and Solent were expected to deliver models within the year that would help test the different options for the development of new LTPs. Officers have been made aware of how models can be used and their limitations.

For Transport for the South East

The project funded five sub-projects aimed at addressing quite diverse capability gaps across the region. Each of those funded solutions had its own outputs and outcomes and created potential for TfSE to share lessons more widely, like the cycling campaign in Wokingham. TfSE was learning how best to transfer knowledge across the region, thereby increasing understanding around key topics.

The consultants commissioned by TfSE had a multidisciplinary team that included people with psychology, business change and transport planning backgrounds. They felt that TfSE could learn from this mixed approach and that the project delivery team was positive about their approach to capability. This combined an understanding of the science of human behaviour with experience of the world of work to attain effective and sustainable performance for both individuals and organisations.

For other STBs

Although this project did not directly involve other STBs, other STBs asked TfSE to share their assessment methodology, approach and outcomes from this project with them. This was something that they were keen to do and that they saw as being one of the roles of their emerging Regional Centre of Excellence (CoE).

For DfT

Research participants felt that the outputs from the project could help DfT **to improve its understanding** of:

- capability/capacity issues facing LAs

- other barriers/issues facing LAs

- how to fund work in LAs

The STB officers reflected that having a single voice from a region helps the DfT as it is much easier to work with one STB, instead of working with 16 LAs.

"It would be pretty hard for the Department for Transport to get bids from all of the local transport authorities across the country, whereas actually, you know, they got bids from 7 STBs and then the STB dealt with the local transport authorities and so that's got to be a big added benefit in terms of the efficiency." (STB delivery team member)

Anticipated future benefits

Research participants reflected that the five funded sub-projects provided supporting information for LTPs and business cases but were unlikely to speed up this work. However, these interventions were still perceived to have been important and of benefit to many LAs.

It was always anticipated that this project would be followed by the establishment of a Regional CoE. The consultants and TfSE delivery team reported that the resources that were developed within the five sub-projects would be placed in the CoE. Therefore, these resources should continue to deliver further benefits in the region and perhaps beyond. There are also less tangible but hopefully lasting benefits from the collaboration that has been fostered between the LAs because of this project, leading to increased knowledge-sharing across the region.

Learning from the experience of delivering online training with Kent, in future the CoE would probably deliver this training itself as there was no added value from outsourcing it to one of the LAs.

TfSE staff spending time with the LAs in the workshops helped them to better address some of the capacity and capability challenges that they are facing, which they thought was very helpful as they look to establish a Regional CoE.

> *"I think the legacy of this capability project is how it feeds into the Centre of Excellence."* (Delivery team member)

Finance and Perceptions of Value for Money

The project team reported that £250,000 was committed and allocated to the five sub-projects. At the time of this evaluation, the consultants had concluded their work. The five funded LAs had also completed their work and progressed with their procurements. Some of those procurements had concluded by the end of the evaluation, others were in progress. This meant that some of the projects had achieved their outputs by the end of the financial year, whereas others were to extend into the 2023/24 financial year.

TfSE was able to enhance value for money by using its scale to negotiate on price. In the case of the Kent training, this meant that 64 instead of 30 officers benefitted. Five LAs were funded directly, but all 16 had benefitted from the funding.

TfSE reported that the overall project is improving capability, and they would have attempted to do some of this work even if the additional funding had not been available. However, the additional funding was thought to have helped lay a foundation for the development of the Regional CoE.

> *"We might have got there in the end through the Centre of Excellence, but I don't think it would have been at the speed that it has been. I don't think we would have delivered any of that in the last 12 months if it hadn't been for that additional funding."* (Delivery team member)

Conclusions and Learning

The stated aim of the project was to support LAs in the accelerated delivery of their LTPs and related existing programmes. In practice the funded solutions were all perceived to be useful for the LTPs and other programmes but are not expected to speed up delivery. Some research participants questioned the extent to which some of the interventions would build wider capability beyond a specific LA. However, all research participants agreed that the training intervention in Kent benefitted all LAs. The learning points below have been derived from a mixture of both positive and negative experiences:

Learning for Transport for the South East

- **Needed to be clearer in their communications,** as some confusion was initially created with LAs as to who would be responsible for the solutions to bridge the capability gaps. The LAs would have benefitted from clearer guidance as to what was expected.

- **More needs to be done to evaluate impact.** As the impact of the project was not expected to be apparent for some months, the STB delivery team felt that it would be interesting to rerun later in the year the original exercise which the consultant conducted with LAs to see whether the funded solutions had actually bridged the capability gaps.

Learning for others looking to implement similar projects

- By funding bespoke sub-projects to support capability, most had very limited transferable benefit to others in the region or beyond. Sub-contracting some of the work to consultants needs to be managed very carefully to ensure the work does not become too bespoke and not transferable.

- It may be more efficient for the STB to administer capability building projects such as training for multiple LAs rather than to outsource this to a particular LA.

Learning for DfT

- The original DfT call for funding was quite generic. Better, clearer guidance from the DfT at the outset of future calls for funding will help manage expectations, save time and resources.

8. Connected Mobility Hub

8.1 Project Description

The Connected Mobility Hub was a project undertaken by Transport for the North (TfN) which piloted an approach to support local authorities (LAs) with additional capacity and capability to deliver local policies under the National Bus Strategy.

The project aimed to provide LAs (primarily non-Mayoral Combined Authorities) with additional specialist capacity to support them in developing and deploying digital and ticketing initiatives at a local level. The Hub was expected to provide technical, commercial and governance support to encourage the set-up of digital and ticketing initiatives and ensure that the LAs could be in the best position to implement and deliver them.

The project was intended to work as follows:

- Partners requested, or TfN offered, support to LAs in the delivery of connected mobility innovations for passengers

- Support was prioritised around links to national strategies and opportunities for benefits of relevance beyond the local innovation

- TfN added local capacity and capability and, where possible, developed guidance and evidence from this added support

With a budget of £60,000, the project proposed three areas of work:

1. **Partner support** - The pilot intended to support at least 5 connected mobility projects. It was hoped that these would have a wider scope than the area of a single LA so more than 5 LAs would be supported. Of these, it was hoped at least one project would support the development of new '**multi-operator ticketing arrangements**' in areas and another was to support **greater publication and use of open data relating to buses**.

2. **Production of Guidance -** the hub would also produce authoritative guidance documentation for LAs in the TfN area to:

   o Support delivery of contactless capping

   o Support fares reform

   o Aid publishing and use of open data

   o Support development and delivery of multi-operator travel card (MTC) schemes

3. **Hub Development -** Evaluate and assess the model for long term delivery of the 'Digital Mobility Hub' and, where viable, produce an outline business case for it.

The project did not involve any other STBs and was intended to be completed by the end of March 2023. However, delays in delivery meant that the schedule was extended to the end of April 2023.

8.2   Evaluation Methodology

The fieldwork was conducted between March and April 2023 and included five interviews with seven representatives from:

- the TfN project delivery team (three interviews with three representatives)

- the DfT (one interview with two representatives)

- the contractor (one interview with two representatives)

A focus group was also carried out with the LAs that had been in receipt of support.

8.3   Findings

Context and Proposal Development

Between 2016 and 2021, TfN worked in partnership with public transport operators, LAs and digital innovators to deliver an ambitious Integrated and Smart Travel Programme (IST). However, in January 2021 funding was withdrawn by the DfT and the programme was wound down.

Following on from this, TfN retained a small workstream dedicated to Connected Mobility and started to develop a Connected Mobility Strategy. This aimed to reposition the role of TfN from direct delivery to "speeding up and joining delivery of initiatives across the North". Early engagement on the development of the Connected Mobility Strategy identified the need for more immediate support to address capacity and capability gaps within authorities, particularly non-Mayoral Combined Authorities:

"Discussions with our partners identified gaps in their knowledge and technical skills that were hindering the delivery of some of the projects across the North" (Delivery team member)

"The big urban areas are progressing reasonably well, but there are gaps in the rural areas because they don't have the expertise to do it" (Delivery team member)

A key challenge for these smaller, more rural authorities was managing cross boundary issues in relation to bus ticketing, particularly when neighbouring authorities were using different systems.

As a result, the idea for a Connected Mobility Hub was conceived to address the knowledge gaps identified by partners and provide a means to begin delivering the strategy. The concept was developed over time by the delivery team with input from stakeholders. When the additional funding was announced by DfT, it was perceived as an opportunity to take forward the idea and pilot an approach.

Given the short timescale to submit a bid, the team did not consider alternative delivery models or engage widely with stakeholders, although DfT was consulted.

Reflecting on the proposal development process, delivery team research participants reported that it could have been improved with more consideration of:

- The resources required

- The practicalities of recruiting into a short-term position and how this risk could be mitigated (e.g. through secondments, job shares)

- How to facilitate collaborative knowledge sharing amongst the LA

Project Delivery

After the funding had been secured, the project team sought internal approval from the TfN Board to start the project, which enabled the team to begin the process of recruiting an additional team member. However, the recruitment process was not successful.

Meanwhile the Project Manager (who specialised in Connected Mobility) started to engage with partner authorities and launched a call for support requests. This was intended to identify the support requirements and themes. The Project Manager left in September 2022, and an internal (non-specialist) project manager was identified to take the project forwards.

A decision was then taken to procure a consultancy company to undertake a scoping exercise to refresh the understanding of the needs and requirements of the LAs. This exercise was undertaken in the autumn of 2022, and was then followed by the procurement of a second consultancy to deliver the required support in the spring of 2023.

The consultancy support packages are set out in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Consultancy support packages delivered

Name	LA Directly Supported	Output delivered
Demand Responsive Transport Lessons Learned	Lancashire County Council	Report
Multi-Operator Toolkit & Roadmap	For York, Tees Valley & Lancashire (and wider distribution to Cheshire)	A guide, a preparedness tool and bespoke support A report on enabling interoperability
Age-Related Discounts / Products Age Related Discounts/Products	York	Report
Cross Border Products	York	Report
Journey Planning Best Practice & Innovation	Tees Valley	Report and recommendations

Whilst the first draft of some of the outputs had been completed by March 2023, the final versions were expected by the end of April 2023. All reports were due to be

published in the summer of 2023 on the TfN website, some in partnership with other STBs (e.g. Midlands Connect). The support itself was targeted at six authorities with a view that the findings could be shared more widely and benefit others. In addition, the consultants also provided support to deliver wider guidance and support in relation to the Connected Mobility Strategy.

The project therefore faced a number of challenges throughout its delivery. These included:

- **Lack of staff continuity -** which caused knowledge to be lost as well as delays.

- **Difficulties recruiting -** which were thought to reflect the short-term and technical nature of the post.

- **Difficulties procuring -** it was not possible initially to find a consultancy through TfN's framework contracts, therefore it was necessary to go out to market and proactively find consultancy support. This came as a surprise to the project team and was thought to reflect a particularly tight technical consultancy market.

Whilst delivery team members were pleased that the project had overcome these significant challenges and been able to deliver outputs for LAs, LA research participants would have preferred **clearer and more consistent communication** around what the Connected Mobility Hub offer was:

"We were asked to fill in forms over 12 months ago and it was a bit confusing as to what the offer was to me and what they were trying to achieve. We filled something in on the basis of not much knowledge as to what the offer was and how it would work and then again with the first consultancy and then we had a further discussion with another consultancy. It has just got a bit confusing as to what this is all about" (Local Authority officer)

"I lost track of it to be honest. The engagement we had was good when we had the engagement, but I'm still not entirely sure who's doing what and how they are doing it and what we're going to find out next" (Local Authority officer)

One LA research participant indicated that the time elapsed between the different phases meant that their requirements changed, and they were not able to benefit from the support when they needed it (i.e. to help make decisions in delivering their Bus Service Improvement Plan). Another research participant acknowledged that they did not have capacity to engage with the project until late November, so the delays were advantageous to them. Conversely other research participants expressed some frustration that engagement with LAs could be "hit and miss" and they suggested that the reason for this may have been because the LA did not have to pay for the support.

There were mixed views about the quality of the support provided to the authorities, although it should be noted that LA representatives had only seen early drafts of the outputs and not all representatives had fully reviewed these. Some felt that the outputs were very detailed with a lot of information, but others felt they were too high level:

"It is very, very high level at the moment, just that you might pursue this strategy, rather than that strategy. So, I think in terms of actually delivering anything, that's going to require getting a lot more commercial data from the operators and doing some serious financial analysis, so we are nowhere near that level of depth yet" (LA officer)

"It seems to be very technical information that's been packaged into a slide deck, so a lot of valuable information in there. I have not been able to review in full yet, but it does look like its useful information that we can make good use of" (LA officer)

The early feedback potentially indicates that some LAs expected more from the work than was deliverable within the timeframe and budget. A potential explanation of the variation in views about usefulness is that the materials produced had to respond to the range of knowledge and experience of the participating authorities' teams.

Despite these issues, positive features of the delivery process were also identified. **DfT's flexibility** in allowing the project to respond to the challenges above was felt to have been helpful. In terms of the revised delivery model, the use of the first consultancy team was felt to have been a useful exercise in refreshing the team's understanding of LA needs as well as informing the brief for the second consultancy team who were delivering the support packages. In practical terms, **the process for managing the consultancy teams appears to have been effective**. The process involved regular meetings as well as the development of mini briefs for each support package. However, not all research participants were clear about how these resource decisions were made. LA officers reflected that it would have been beneficial for the LAs to have had a greater involvement in the planning and scoping of the work to ensure it aligned with their needs.

Reflecting on whether the delivery model was the right one, all research participants agreed that a centrally co-ordinated approach, with one consultancy delivering the support, offered more benefits than a grant funding model (e.g. where LAs would be given a grant to procure their own support). However, the delivery could have been improved by:

- **Creating a sense of ownership and involvement amongst the LAs**, potentially by bringing together the LAs in a meeting at the beginning to explain the process and what the offer was, and to secure collective agreement of the priorities. This would have had the added benefit of creating a knowledge sharing network and a collegiate approach, which could have then led to other shared activities (such as joint procurement).

- **Better communication with LAs -** to give them a better understanding of the process, what they might expect from whom, and when.

- **Quality checking and peer review of outputs -** it was suggested that a peer review process by other stakeholders such as DfT and LAs who were further on in their respective Connected Mobility journeys could have ensured the outputs would be high quality and their consistency with wider initiatives.

Emerging Impact

At the time of the evaluation fieldwork, the consultancy support to the LAs was ongoing. Some LAs had seen early drafts of reports and presentations, but others had not. However, none of the outputs had been finalised and signed off. Therefore,

research participants were asked to comment on what they **expected** the impact to be for LAs, STBs and the DfT.

For LAs

The main benefit for LTAs was expected to be an increase in their **knowledge of a complicated and technical area**. LA research participants indicated that draft outputs they had seen to date did provide them with "some pointers" and provided them with material that they would not have been able to produce themselves. It was hoped that other LAs would benefit from the outputs once they were published and shared more widely.

Research participants recognised that **the potential impact for LAs might depend on their starting points**. For those in receipt of Bus Service Improvement Plan funding, the project potentially provided an opportunity to **develop aspects of their proposals** (although one of these authorities indicated that the support came too late to achieve this). For those not in receipt of funding it was expected to help them **get in a position to be ready to bid** for future funding opportunities.

Therefore, research participants hoped that it would help to **improve capabilities** within Northern authorities, **prevent them from getting left behind** and help them to **access more funding** in the future.

LA research participants hoped that the **proposed roadmap for integrated ticketing** would help them to either **start or progress on this journey**, help to overcome cross-boundary issues and be ready to participate in national initiatives such as Project Coral, a national initiative involving bus operators, Transport for the West Midlands and DfT to develop the back-office functions to support multi-operator ticketing:

"The whole integrated ticketing, multi-operator ticketing, to be honest, it is in the too difficult pile, which is why we are interested in this work....I'd like to be in a position, through this piece of work, that we know what we need to do in terms of getting a back office set up and how we replicate some of the products that are in the city regions" (LA officer)

In addition, research participants also hoped that the project would provide a vehicle for **collaboration between the authorities** (see under 'expected legacy' below for further discussion of this point).

LA research participants also felt that it would have been helpful to have known what reports and guidance the other LAs were receiving so they were aware of potential upcoming material to be shared.

For Transport for the North

Participants indicated that the project was directly benefiting TfN by **informing the development of its Connected Mobility Strategy** and providing it with a clearer understanding of the support needed by its authorities (including cross boundary issues). In addition, the development of the roadmap for integrated ticketing was also seen to support the development of a consistent approach to this area across LAs in the TfN area. However, some concern was expressed that by focusing on non-Mayoral Combined Authorities there was a potential for divergence with the MCAs.

For DfT

Research participants reflected that the work **aligned with and supported DfT policy** in relation to bus travel and active travel and supported DfT policy by providing direct support to LAs to "raise their game" and "share best practice".

Research participants also felt that the outputs from the project could help DfT **to improve its understanding** of:

- capability/capacity issues facing LAs in this area

- the other barriers/issues facing LAs in taking forward these issues

- research requirements

Anticipated Future Benefits

The delivery team highlighted that the Connected Mobility Hub continues to provide a delivery vehicle for the TfN Connected Mobility Strategy which was approved by the TfN Board in July 2023. Therefore, the team was making the case for resources to support the continuation of the Hub through TfN's business planning process and Centre of Excellence.

The delivery model was expected to evolve. For this reason, a key outcome from the project was to develop a roadmap for future delivery that aligned with the strategy. Within this context, research participants highlighted that the project identified other areas for potential support under the Connected Mobility theme and revealed that there was a willingness for joint working. This ranged from a simple desire to share experiences and best practice to delivering joint funding bids and projects (e.g. joint procurements). Therefore, follow-on activities to the project were expected to focus more on this aspect.

Whilst the project's focus was on the North, research participants highlighted that there were opportunities for the outputs to be shared more widely and for the team to collaborate with other STBs (in particular Midlands Connect) who were reported to be active on the theme).

Overall, research participants felt that the project had improved the relationship between TfN and the LAs, which some felt may have been damaged by the winding down of the Integrated and Smart Travel Programme. LAs indicated that the fact that TfN had been willing to invest in smaller authorities was welcomed:

"What it has done is demonstrate that they're willing to allocate funding to us and to work with us, so I think from that point of view that is really reassuring and beneficial for us to be part of" (Local Authority officer)

Similarly, other research participants felt that the project had helped to show that TfN could add value to local delivery. It was reported to be the first time that TfN had provided direct support in this area. Therefore, it was perceived to add credibility to TfN's work in this space and aligned with its repositioned role.

Finance and Perceptions of Value for Money

The project team reported that they expected the DfT allocation to be spent by the end of April/early May 2023. The project had a relatively small budget and some research participants reflected that a larger budget may have been helpful,

especially as the project ended up engaging a consultancy, rather than using an in-house staff delivery model.

In terms of achieving value for money, research participants agreed that the centralised model (whereby TfN procured the support, rather than individual LAs) enhanced value for money by:

- reducing overheads

- ensuring outputs could be shared more widely

Conclusions and Learning

The project had a difficult journey with a number of challenges which set back delivery. Whilst the team successfully found a route around these setbacks, the process of overcoming them delayed activity. LA research participants found the process confusing at times. They found it difficult to comment on the potential benefits as they had not received final outputs, but they were tentatively optimistic that benefits would arise. Therefore, learning points have been derived from a mixture of both positive and negative experiences:

Learning for Transport for the North

- It can achieve its objectives by supporting and facilitating its LAs, rather than through direct delivery

- As the Connected Mobility Hub moves forward, there may be benefits to focusing on developing a collaborative network that involves a wide range of LAs

- As staff turnover can be high, it is important to ensure project documentation is kept in a way which will enable a new starter to pick up projects that are in progress

Learning for others looking to implement similar projects

- For relatively short-term projects, consideration should be given to the risks associated with recruitment and procurement and how these might be mitigated using alternative models (e.g. secondments, job shares)

- Be realistic about what can be achieved with the resources available

- Consider how to create a sense of ownership and involvement amongst end-users

- Consider how outputs might be peer reviewed and quality checked

Learning for DfT

- Even small projects can take time to set up and commence delivery and therefore the programme schedule should be realistic and if necessary flexible.

9. Summary of case study evidence and recommendations for future work

9.1 Overview

The five case study projects have been presented in Chapters 4-8, with the evaluation methodology of the study outlined in Chapter 2. For reference, the five were:

1. Decarbonisation Playbook, led by England's Economic Heartland (EEH)
2. Rural Centre of Excellence (CoE), led by Transport East (TE)
3. Identifying a Cross-STB Network of Alternative Fuel Refuelling Sites for Freight, led by Midlands Connect (MC)
4. Capability and Capacity Interventions to Accelerate Local Authority (LA) Delivery, led by Transport for the South East (TfSE)
5. Connected Mobility Hub, led by Transport for the North (TfN)

The following sections provide a summary of findings, highlighting the key differences and similarities across the case studies. This follows the same structure as in previous chapters, covering the development of the proposals and delivery of the projects, followed by impact, perceived value for money, and anticipated future benefits, as far as it was possible to assess those one year on from the grants being awarded. Finally, cross-cutting learnings and recommendations are identified.

9.2 Context and Proposal Development

Across the five projects, the drivers or motivators for developing a proposal included a range of external and internal factors.

External motivators included:

- Government Policy e.g. the Transport Decarbonisation Plan (EEH)
- Local demand for support (e.g. EEH) and evidence of need (e.g. MC)
- Opportunity to deliver a collaborative project and encouragement from partners (e.g. MC)

And internal factors included:

- Issues facing the area (e.g. TE in terms of rurality)
- Implementing STB strategies/workstreams (e.g. TfN and TE)
- Existing expertise e.g.:
  - TE – STB lead for rural mobility
  - MC – leading on alternative fuels for freight

- Opportunities to build on/extend previous work (e.g. EEH and MC)

In terms of the proposal development process, strengths included:

- Examples of collaborative projects which spanned more than one STB (e.g. MC/EEH)

- Examples of strong engagement with a wide range of stakeholder groups to develop the proposal

Research participants reflected that the process could have been improved with a greater consideration of:

- The resources required

- The practicalities of recruiting, tendering and procuring (e.g. several of the case studies faced challenges with recruiting staff or finding consultants in a short timeframe, or retaining staff if the appointment was a short contract)

- The time required to deliver the project

Participants also noted that DfT's requirements could have been made clearer in the guidance.

Except for STB delivery team participants, most research participants were not engaged in the proposal development, but they generally felt that they did not need to be.

Some commented that they did not necessarily have the capacity/capability to provide meaningful comment at the proposal stage. Others, including some delivery team members, were brought into the projects after they were developed.

9.3 Project Delivery

The five case studies had similarities and differences in both their project focus and approach to delivery.

- Two focussed on **Tool Development**: Decarbonisation Playbook and Alternative Fuels for Freight focused on developing detailed, practical tools that could potentially have wide benefit across England and perhaps even beyond.

- The other three (Rural Centre of Excellence (CoE), Capability and Capacity Interventions to Accelerate LA Delivery and Connected Mobility Hub) can be identified as **Knowledge Centres** as they contributed to hubs or centres of knowledge around specific topics - rural mobility, Local Transport Plans (LTP) and bus ticketing - that could become a resource for LAs and help to bridge a capability gap.

The tool development carried out by EEH and MC used national funding to address challenges that were faced by all regions (such as how to decarbonise transport in each LA and where to situate alternative fuel hubs nationally). Such tool development is hard and complicated to deliver. It is subject to dependencies which may impact timelines and it can be a costly process. Both projects had strong

collaboration across a number of STBs and engaged contractors to deliver part of the work.

The three knowledge centres used different approaches to address similar problems. At the time of the evaluation in the spring of 2023, which was one year after the funding for the projects was awarded, they were at different stages of maturity and so it was not possible for the evaluation to draw final conclusions. The different approaches are described below.

TE used its funding to launch the Rural CoE. It did so through a combination of approaches that included a survey of parish councils to understand rural mobility needs and potential solutions across its region, and engagement of an academic partner and other STBs to identify good practice in rural transport across the country.

TfSE is in the process of setting up a Regional CoE, but the additional funding was not dedicated to this. Rather, the expectation was that by funding five interventions to support LA delivery of their LTPs, TfSE would have several resources and be able to identify regional good practice that could be made available more widely by the Regional CoE, once established. The five interventions (together with potential future interventions that await funding) were selected through a competitive bidding process, and then further developed with support from consultants.

TfN saw the use of the additional funding for the Connected Mobility Hub as a way of piloting a concept with a view to establishing a Digital Mobility Hub. LAs submitted requests for support and five packages of support were delivered by consultants. The outputs could be made more widely available via a future knowledge hub.

Across these three case studies, research participants were positive about the delivery processes, reflecting that they benefitted from:

- **Good project management and organisation** – in particular, where delivery teams and project managers were approachable and responsive this was viewed positively by research participants.

- **Regular communication** – this was not reported across all case studies and took different guises where it was identified. For example, research participants mentioned that MC had weekly project meetings between the client and the contractor, and the STB Rural Transport Group noted the value of regular updates from the TE delivery team.

- **Good engagement with research participants and beneficiaries** – the way the delivery teams engaged with research participants and beneficiaries varied across the case studies according to context and audience. Good engagement ensured that projects addressed user needs, helped shape the delivery process, influenced the project's direction and helped alignment with national activities.

Equally, they also faced several challenges. These challenges were often specific to a single case study, but those that challenges that applied to more than one project included the following:

- **Staff recruitment and retention** – research participants reported that some projects were delayed by the length of time taken or difficulty recruiting

suitably qualified staff. Lack of staff continuity was reported as an issue for the Connected Mobility Hub.

- **Understanding DfT's requirements for LTPs** – at the time of the fieldwork the DfT had not published its guidance on LTPs, which had implications for more than one case study including those led by EEH and TfSE. Some research participants expressed a frustration that the DfT had not published its guidance on LTPs and felt that this meant that LAs and delivery teams were left to deal with this uncertainty.

Some research participants felt that the project delivery could have been improved by:

- **More time to deliver projects** – several of the delivery teams reported that due to delays, delivery was squeezed into the last quarter of the financial year, or some expected deliverables were moved into the next financial year.

- **A more structured approach to the engagement with DfT** - which allowed for better information sharing (both ways) between the delivery teams and the DfT policy and technical teams.

- **Improving communications to keep all partners informed** – some research participants felt that there were weaknesses in communication between the delivery teams and their organisations, such as how issues raised at meetings would be addressed and information sharing more generally.

9.4   Emerging Impact

At the time of the evaluation fieldwork the projects had reached different stages in their completion, and this is reflected in the research participants' comments on impact. For example, in the case of the TfSE Regional CoE, research participants were able to speak about the benefits of carbon management training that they received from the sub-project delivered by Kent County Council. However, as the final version of the Playbook had not been issued, research participants in the EEH case study could only identify what they expected the impact would be.

For LAs

Research participants across more than one case study identified the following benefits or potential benefits of the initiatives:

- **Supporting the delivery of LTPs and meeting quantifiable carbon reduction (QCR) requirements**. For instance:
  - The Decarbonisation Playbook is expected to be an agile tool that can be used by LAs to calculate the carbon savings from a particular set of interventions or used to support the identification of proposed plans.
  - The TfSE funded carbon training has helped build capability across the region and will help meet the QCR requirements in LTPs.

- The TE delivery team reported that in the next financial year, the work of the Rural CoE is expected to focus on supporting LAs as they develop the next version of their LTPs and has gathered useful resources to assist with this.

- **Resource savings** – Research participants believed that the development of tools would save LAs money and time, as they would not have to commission consultants to develop complex models themselves. Likewise, research participants believed that effective knowledge centres would benefit them by saving resources, by making evidence easily available to them in a single place. A view put forward by some LA research participants is that they wanted others to assist with the strategic development so that they could focus on the practical application. The centres also have the potential to target resource towards the LAs that need it most.

- **Sharing good practice** – Research participants from the three knowledge centre case studies (TfN, TE and TfSE) expressed an expectation that the sharing of good practice should lead to efficiencies in the relevant topic areas (e.g. connected mobility or rural mobility).

- **Inter-LA collaboration** – Some research participants involved in the knowledge centres expected that the projects would provide a vehicle for collaboration between the authorities and encourage dialogue.

- **Evidence based policy making** - Several research participants reflected that both knowledge centres and tool development projects would help LAs to deliver policies and interventions that are grounded in better evidence.

- **Addressing capability/capacity constraints** - Whilst research participants acknowledged that that the decarbonisation tools would not increase the number of staff available to LA, they would nonetheless free up resources, particularly in more resource-constrained authorities.

- **Knowledge transfer** – Research participants reported the benefit for LAs of an increase in their knowledge, especially in complicated technical areas like the systems behind integrated or multi-operator ticketing.

- **Building capacity amongst those LAs that need it most** – A few research participants expressed a hope that capability support would particularly help to build capacity amongst smaller or under-resourced LAs, prevent authorities from getting left behind and help authorities access more funding in the future.

For STBs

Research participants highlighted a number of benefits for STBs including:

- **Improving their understanding of particular issues and challenges** - Research participants across several case studies highlighted that the project benefitted STBs by improving their understanding of particular issues (such as decarbonisation and rural transport) and how to address them.

- **Finding cross-border solutions to issues which extend across boundaries** - Research participants reflected that several projects helped STBs to look beyond their immediate boundaries to find solutions to issues.

For instance, the Alternative Fuels for Freight project identified potential sites across all seven STBs, regardless of boundaries. Similarly, the Connected Mobility Hub helped LAs to find solutions to cross border ticketing issues.

- **Influencing/clarifying the role of STBs** - Research participants highlighted how the projects have helped to clarify the STBs' remit as a support organisation, rather than a transport operator.

- I**nforming the development of strategic STB plans –** Research participants highlighted that some of the projects (e.g. the Connected Mobility Hub) had already influenced the development of strategic plans, whereas others had the potential to influence future plans through the provision of better evidence (e.g. the Decarbonisation Playbook).

- **Understanding better the support needs of LA**s – Research participants also highlighted how the knowledge exchange projects in particular had helped STBs to better understand the support needs of their constituent LAs.

And for those involving more than one STB:

- **Better knowledge sharing –** Research participants highlighted how projects such as the Decarbonisation Playbook and the Alternative Fuels for Freight had improved knowledge sharing and collaborative work between STBs

- **Avoiding duplication of effort –** Similarly, by working together, research participants felt that STBs could avoid duplicating work across the network.

For DfT

Several research participants also highlighted potential benefits for DfT. These included:

- **Policy and strategy development** – some research participants highlighted that the evidence contained within the alternative fuel and decarbonisation tools and good practice from the knowledge centres could be useful for the Department in developing national policies and strategy (e.g. on active travel or informing the freight strategy).

- **Improving understanding of decarbonisation –** research participants suggested that the tools and evidence collected by the rural CoE, and the separate tool developed by the alternative fuels for freight project would help the DfT to better understand the infrastructure required to support the decarbonisation of transport.

- **Highlight gaps in evidence** – some research participants indicated that the decarbonisation tools would highlight potential gaps in the evidence base which DfT could aim to address. Similarly, as knowledge centres (such as the one hosted by TE) collate both good practice and challenges, they can also help to identify gaps in the evidence.

- **Capability/capacity and other barriers/issues facing LAs** – research participants, especially of the knowledge centres, felt that the outputs from the projects could help DfT to improve its understanding of some of the capability/capacity challenges and other barriers/issues facing LAs.

Anticipated Future Benefits

All five projects were expected to continue in some form beyond the end of the funding period.

- The two toolkits had both been **designed for ongoing development** with the teams considering factors such as Intellectual Property, data dictionaries and alignment with the Common Analytical Framework.

- Similarly, the knowledge sharing projects expected the **resources developed through the project to be used within Centres of Excellence** moving forward.

The delivery teams were in the process of securing additional funds to take forward ongoing activity, including through other STB workstreams.

Additionally, research participants across the case studies also highlighted some common factors that would contribute to the legacy of this work:

- **Improved relationship between STBs** - Research participants from all projects felt that their interaction had the potential to improve the relationship between STBs, and in some cases, with their LAs.

- **Transition from strategic organisations to Centres of Excellence** – the additional funding has contributed to a wider role for STBs beyond being strategic regional organisations. They feel that it has demonstrated that they can offer nationally significant distinctive expertise through knowledge centres which can offer greater operational support to LAs, adding value to local delivery.

9.5   Finance and Perceptions of Value for Money

In the main, the delivery teams were able to report that the DfT allocations had been spent broadly in line with their project plans and the expected outputs were delivered. However, some deviations were reported:

- Due to the expanded scope of the Playbook (EEH), local funding was required to support the enhanced baselining process.

- MC expected the DfT allocation to have been spent by the end of May 2023.

- Although TfSE had committed the entire grant funding budget and the consultants had concluded their work and their reports by financial year end, some of the funded solutions had outputs that were expected to complete near the beginning of the 2023/24 financial year.

- TfN expected the DfT allocation to be spent by early May 2023.

The projects were thought to offer value for money by:

- Delivering economies of scale (e.g. the two toolkits)

- Preventing duplication of expenditure (e.g. the two toolkits)

- Sharing resources (e.g. the knowledge sharing projects)

- Creating opportunities for collective bargaining (e.g. TfSE Rural Centre of Excellence)

9.6 Cross-project learning points

Learning points based on both positive and negative experiences are identified:

Learning points for project leads and their partners

- Enabling other STBs to access procurement frameworks could streamline the procurement of joint STB projects

- Collaborative projects with multiple partners take longer to deliver than single agency projects, and it is important to allow sufficient time to engage with partners at each stage of the project

- If consultants are used, they need to be carefully and fully briefed so that they deliver outputs that can have a relevance and legacy greater than the immediate commission

Learning points for others looking to implement similar projects

Tool development:

- Tools like the Decarbonisation Playbook offer useful practical support to LAs within the Centres of Excellence programme.

- For large, complicated projects, there may be benefits in sharing the project management function or providing a 'super group' support function across more than one STB.

- For complex modelling projects it is important to consider data standards, legal protocols, commercial arrangements, risks and liabilities.

- Engagement with a full range of stakeholders and user groups can play a vital role in ensuring tools meet the needs of end-users.

- In the case of modelling projects, project plans need to be flexible to accommodate the complexity of those projects that cannot always follow the original plan.

Knowledge hubs or centres of excellence:

- Knowledge centres can offer useful support to LAs, but their outputs must remain practically relevant and how to access them must be well communicated.

- It may be more efficient for the STB to administer capability-building projects such as training for multiple LAs, rather than to outsource this to a particular LA

Learning points for the DfT

- The interventions have revealed gaps in the evidence such as the effectiveness of decarbonisation interventions and workable solutions to rural

mobility. DfT should consider how these gaps are addressed through future evaluation studies.

- The STBs felt the process for engagement with the DfT over the project proposals and during project delivery would have benefitted from being more structured and with better two-way communication.

- Complex, collaborative modelling projects take time to deliver. Even small projects can take time to set up and commence delivery and so a flexible approach is sometimes required.

- Better, clearer guidance from the DfT at the outset of future calls for funding will help manage expectations and save time and resources.

9.7   Recommendations

From the findings, a number of recommendations for the future relationships between DfT and the Subnational Transport Bodies (STB) and local authorities (LA) can be drawn out. Some of these also refer to the emerging role of the STBs.

1. DfT, the STBs and LAs should continue to build on the positive experiences of collaboration and seek further opportunities to benefit from efficiencies.

2. It could be helpful to consider the applicability of the Centre of Excellence (CoE) model, potentially leading to further examples being established.

3. DfT should take time to consider how best to work with STBs, which are diverse in their statutory status and resourcing. It should be borne in mind that STBs operate in different contexts, in terms of politics and relationships with politicians.

4. For future initiatives requiring engagement from across the STBs, DfT should improve flows of information to STBs and standardise the processes.

5. DfT should continue to build on support provided to smaller STBs to improve their capability and capacity.

6. When announcing new funding opportunities, DfT should issue clear guidance on expectations and provide realistic timeframes, allowing STBs time to clarify expectations.

7. STBs proposing projects with complex partnering and consultancy arrangements or requiring the recruitment of very specialist staff (such as to head a CoE or lead a highly technical project), need to ensure scheduling is realistic about the time needed for the necessary procedures.

8. STBs should explore the development of common procurement frameworks to help save time and drive efficiencies in the use of consultants.

9. The interventions revealed gaps in the evidence base around the effectiveness of decarbonisation interventions and workable solutions to rural mobility. DfT should consider how these gaps can be addressed through future evaluation studies and evidence reviews.