



Demand responsive transport:

users' views of pre-booked
community buses and shared taxis

June 2016



Anthony Smith

Foreword

We partnered with three local authorities to understand more about the impact of more flexible public transport and its contribution to meeting the needs of passengers. We looked at three different kinds of service and commissioned independent research among users and non-users. Our research concludes that some kinds of demand responsive transport can provide an attractive service, especially for older and disabled people, but it is not clear that it currently offers a good alternative to conventional bus services for other transport users, especially younger people.

Reductions in funding have left local authorities with difficult decisions to make about local public transport. Effective public consultation and full transparency enable local communities to hold them properly accountable for those decisions. We published *Bus service reviews: consulting on changes to local services – a best practice toolkit*, to help councils to meet community and passenger expectations.

With less public money to go around, many local authorities have started to ask if there may be a better way of spending some of their budgets. We intend to carry out further insight work this year looking at how the availability of all the publicly available transport (bus, community transport, patient transport, taxis, rail and other others) in certain areas has changed. This should give us a better insight into how the 'total transport' provision has shifted, rather than focusing on one mode of transport.

One solution being explored is providing some services 'on demand' rather than paying for scheduled services which run irrespective of how many

passengers they carry. The rise of Uber and other on demand services has fuelled these debates.

Five years ago we published research, *Rural bus services*, comparing the views of passengers using Herefordshire Council's tendered market day buses with those of passengers using Shropshire Council's demand responsive Shropshire Link buses. We followed this up by researching the impact on passengers from cuts to bus services, *Bus service reductions – the impact on passengers*.

Valuable lessons can be learnt about 'on demand' services and we urge all decision makers to use this research as a starting point when considering the future of local public transport services.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A.J.C.' followed by a stylized signature.

Anthony Smith
Chief Executive
Transport Focus

Summary

To understand more about the impact of demand responsive transport (DRT) and its contribution to meeting the needs of passengers, we partnered with three local authorities. We chose Suffolk, Worcestershire and Hampshire since this enabled us to look at three different models of DRT provided under three different sections of the Transport Act 1985. Some had fixed routes and timetables, others offered greater flexibility:

- Suffolk Links, provided under section 22 of the

Transport Act 1985, which is available six days a week, 12 hours a day to any destination within a defined area and operates with paid drivers

- Community bus services in Worcestershire, provided under section 19 of the Transport Act 1985, which largely follow particular routes, run at particular times and use volunteer drivers
- Taxi share in Hampshire is run to a set timetable and operated by taxi firms. It is provided under section 11 of the Transport Act 1985.

Overall findings

- While there are overall cost savings to be made by introducing demand responsive transport DRT, there can be a significant reduction in the number of passengers when conventional services are withdrawn. However, it may be possible to both save public money and increase passenger numbers if a wider reorganisation is carried out.
- Any DRT service tends to be welcomed where the alternative is loss of public transport.
- Overall, current service users appear to be those who are retired and have no other transport options, as they are more able to accommodate the limitations of the DRT service.
- How a change from conventional bus to DRT is introduced, and how it continues to be communicated, influences how passengers view their particular service.
- Passengers in Suffolk and Hampshire pay roughly the same to use DRT as they did to use conventional services; in Worcestershire they pay more. Concessionary passes can be used at appropriate times, although in Worcestershire pass holders qualify for a reduction, but not free travel. Among the passengers we spoke to, fares were generally accepted as reasonable and legitimate in order to sustain a public transport service in the area.
- Suffolk Links passengers can travel anywhere anytime, so are not restricted to the routes and times of the conventional bus. Some taxi share users in Hampshire now have a much less frequent service than before, but residents of other villages have gained services. In any case, taxi share was introduced to ensure that at a time of bus cuts everyone had some kind of service available. Unsurprisingly, passengers tend to welcome any kind of service where the alternative is loss of public transport.
- Passengers in each of our three case study areas appreciated the convenience of being dropped off at their front door.
- In Worcestershire and Suffolk the largely elderly and disabled clientele particularly appreciate the company of other regular passengers and the helpfulness of drivers. Similarly, passengers in Hampshire expressed disappointment that taxi journeys are less social than the bus, and noted that the change to taxis has removed the direct, personal connection that they had had with their regular bus driver.
- In Suffolk, passengers appreciated the accessibility of the vehicles. Some users of shared taxis in Hampshire commented that it was easier to get in and out of buses than taxis.
- Passengers in Worcestershire did not generally mind the inconvenience and restriction of having to book in advance. In Hampshire passengers pointed out that the requirement to book the day before rules out spontaneous trips and is out of step with many 'same day' doctor's appointments.
- There was consistently low awareness of DRT services among the potential users we spoke to. When the service is explained, with its accessible vehicles and front door drop-offs, younger people tend to view the services as more geared to the needs of older and disabled people.
- Potential users in Worcestershire may be put off by the shortage of time allowed at their destination in the fixed timetable; limited times and destinations also presented barriers to use in Hampshire.

Conclusions and recommendations

DRT can offer a way of providing a service where one might not otherwise exist at all. DRT can make a limited contribution to meeting transport needs of isolated communities, particularly if it is introduced as part of a wider review with full public consultation. However, reductions in service frequency tend to be accompanied by falls in patronage, so any financial savings to local authorities are often achieved at a longer term cost.

Services which replicate a conventional bus service more closely (fixed timetable, route and multiple passengers) seem to be best received as expectations are relatively low. Delivery by voluntary organisations increases passengers' willingness to accommodate limitations and provides benefits which help offset limitations in the service.

Services which allow for greater flexibility but, as a result, reduce predictability are harder to use, which reduces satisfaction.

Services which are furthest removed from the previous financially unviable service, such as taxi share, offer a significantly different service with specific limitations and drawbacks which contributes to lower satisfaction as a public transport option.

In its current form, DRT tends to be disproportionately used by older and disabled people and awareness among other sections of the population is generally low.

Publicity designed to increase take-up of DRT, particularly among younger and middle aged people and those going to work and making onward journeys, should tackle these assumptions head-on and carefully consider the practicality of addressing some of these concerns while continuing to meet the needs of current users.

We urge local transport authorities to bear our findings in mind when considering reductions in conventional bus services and when designing, reviewing and promoting DRT services.

Background

In recent years, local authorities' transport budgets have been coming under increasing pressure.

Five years ago we published, *Rural bus services*, comparing the views of passengers using Herefordshire Council's tendered market day buses with those of passengers using Shropshire Council's demand-responsive Shropshire Link buses.

We followed this up by researching the impact on passengers on cuts to their bus services, *Bus service reductions – the impact on passengers*. Recognising the role of effective public consultation and full transparency in promoting local accountability over cuts and changes to bus services, we also published *Bus service reviews: consulting on changes to local services – a best practice toolkit*.

As part of decisions to reduce spending on buses to help balance budgets, many local authorities decided to invest some of the money they spent on subsidising conventional bus services on DRT. This could include community transport (provided under section 22 of the Transport Act 1985) or a wider range of DRT, including taxis, car clubs, car sharing and volunteer schemes.

With pressures on local authority transport budgets showing no sign of relenting, DRT is likely to continue to appear to be an attractive option. But how successful has this approach been from a passenger perspective? To what extent have councils been able to save taxpayers' money by introducing genuine efficiency savings, for example by using smaller vehicles

or volunteer drivers? Are passengers' transport needs being met in the process, or have reductions in destinations and frequencies and increases in charges to users reduced transport accessibility? How successful has DRT been in meeting demand and satisfying passengers while saving public money? What are the circumstances which maximise their effectiveness?

Recognising the potential complexity of making such comparisons and the importance of understanding local circumstances we decided to adopt a case study approach to seeking answers to these questions. We recruited a number of enthusiastic partner authorities and worked with them to identify types of DRT and specific areas or routes to focus on. We would have liked to have had the time and the money to have been able to spread our net wider. However, we felt that the authorities who agreed to work with us provided us with a broad enough range to draw some conclusions.

In Suffolk we were able to reflect on several years of experience of Suffolk Links community transport service in two parts of the county, provided under section 22 of the Transport Act 1985.

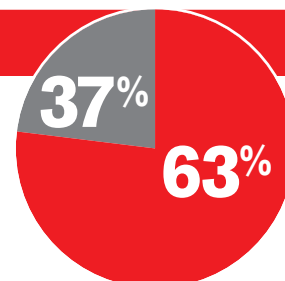
In Worcestershire we looked at the performance of a couple of DRT services provided under section 19 of the Transport Act 1985.

In Hampshire we reviewed the operation of the council's taxi share, provided under section 11 of the Transport Act 1985, in two parts of the county.

Suffolk County Council

case study

Background



80% of trips are on busy commercial services



living in urban areas
living in rural areas

Suffolk is a medium-sized county, with a population of around 730,000. The main towns include Ipswich, Stowmarket, Newmarket, Bury St. Edmunds, Lowestoft and Felixstowe. Over half of the population (63 per cent) live in urban areas with a large minority (37 per cent) living in the countryside, some of whom live on busy routes between urban centres.

Most trips are on busy commercial bus services, but passengers needing to travel at quieter times or in more isolated rural areas rely on Suffolk County Council to subsidise the services they use.

The council has reviewed the transport needs of its residents and made an assessment of the best way of meeting them as required by section 63 of Transport Act 1985. Following the Comprehensive Spending Review in autumn 2010, it published outline plans for each of its contracts for supported bus services. Cuts in funding from central government and decisions by local politicians led to a reduction in the council's budget for supporting bus services and a need to set priorities: a 50 per cent reduction in 2011. Decisions were based on the viability of each route, the alternatives available and 'soft' factors such as isolation from services. The approach to every decision on routes looked at a number of options (in order of priority):

- remove subsidy and replace with a commercial delivery of service
- negotiate reduced levels of financial support to existing operators
- redesign existing services in one of the following ways:
 - reduce level of the service to meet known demand
 - redesign services to combine elements of existing routes

- replace bus services with DRT type services
- withdraw services entirely.

In many cases, support for marginal bus services which failed these tests was removed. However, some high subsidy routes were retained due to lack of alternatives. For the most part the lost services were evenings, Sunday and market day contracts.

The council used patronage and revenue data to help shape their decisions. They also considered what alternatives were available in the area albeit that sometimes that meant a change of bus was needed to complete a journey that had previously been a direct service. There have been some exceptions but they have generally managed to keep some form of passenger transport provision in each area.

Much of the council's remaining budget has been used to support mainstream bus services, often in conjunction with home-school transport, which could not be run for profit by commercial operators. A total of £1.2 million was allocated to community transport in 2011-12, on top of the local bus service budget of £2.1m.

In addition to DRT the council has also supported a number of other flexible schemes for many years, including community car services where passengers are driven by volunteers using their own cars; and Wheels Within Wheels and Dial-a-Ride (in both cases volunteers driving accessible council vehicles). Passengers contribute to the cost.



Suffolk Links

There are 13 DRT services in Suffolk, provided under the Suffolk Links banner, covering the vast majority of the county.

Suffolk Links provides DRT services under section 22 of the Transport Act 1985.

The services are operated by fully accessible minibuses provided by the council, with paid drivers.

There is no fixed route or timetable. The service is available from 7am to 7pm Monday to Saturday. Passengers need to book in advance, saying where they want to go and when, and the operator will then work out a route. This service picks up and drops off all of the people who have booked to travel at that time anywhere within the designated area, whether it be a bus stop or someone's home. Bookings can be made up to seven days in advance; two return bookings can be held at the same time.

Fares are based on bus fares – concessionary passes can be used after 9.30am and all day on Saturdays.

Case studies: we looked at services in two of the 13 Suffolk Links areas – Wilford and Brecks – at either end of the county.

Description of Wilford services

Suffolk Links Wilford covers a small area of the Suffolk coast, north of Felixstowe and south of Aldeburgh. It is operated by CATS (Coastal Accessible Transport Scheme), under contract to Suffolk County Council.

As part of a wider reorganisation, the council looked at a group of four conventional bus service contracts operating in the area and realigned them. In Wilford, DRT was introduced in 2011-12 as part of this wider reorganisation.

Some conventional bus services have continued to operate in the Wilford area. Route 71/72 still runs twice a day six days a week between Woodbridge and Orford in the early morning and late afternoon (the early morning service continues on to Ipswich).

Comparison of Suffolk Links Wilford with previous bus service

Prior to the reorganisation, four supported services in Wilford cost the council £257,422 in 2008-9 and generated 67,991 journeys at a per passenger subsidy of £3.79. After the reorganisation, in 2011-12 the council was spending £187,995.30 on four conventional services in Wilford plus Suffolk Links, generating 72,302 passengers at a per passenger subsidy of £2.60.

The Suffolk Links Wilford DRT element of this cost the council £38,760 (excluding vehicle costs of £10,000) in 2011-12. A total of 8,678 single passenger journeys were made on Suffolk Links Wilford in 2011-12. By 2013-14, the cost of the Suffolk Links Wilford service had risen somewhat, to £40,915 (excluding vehicle costs), and the number of passenger journeys had fallen to 6,944.

In the Wilford area, residents of Alderton and Bawdsey are completely reliant on Suffolk Links if they want to go to nearby villages or Woodbridge, from which they can make onward journeys to Ipswich and beyond by bus or train. Residents in other villages east of Woodbridge still have occasional buses which they do not need to book, but now have an option to travel at other times of day and on Saturdays by booking a journey with Suffolk Links. According to CATS which runs the service, 53 per cent of users are eligible for a concessionary pass and four per cent have a disability; regular passengers travel to work daily while others regularly travel to Woodbridge to shop there a couple of times a week.

Route 71 also used to provide four daily weekday services which continued beyond the Wilford area between Woodbridge and Ipswich and villages to the east of Woodbridge. There is now just one early morning service a day which provides such a direct link.

Description of Brecks service

Brecks is the largest Suffolk Links area. It lies in the north-west corner of the county, bordered by Thetford (Norfolk) in the north, Cambridgeshire in the west and Bury St. Edmunds in the south. Brecks is more isolated and sparsely populated than Wilford.

Suffolk Links Brecks did not emerge out of thin air. A Brecks Warrener service was introduced in 2004, providing a grant-funded scheduled local bus service. This linked Brandon, Lakenheath, Thetford and villages in the western part of the Brecks area, and supplemented the R1, 193 and 200/201 services. The following year it was rebranded as Brecks Bus. When the grant funding ran out two years later, Suffolk County Council converted it into a dial-a-ride service operating between Brandon and Thetford. Suffolk Links Brecks, operated by The Voluntary Network, under contract to Suffolk County Council, grew out of this service.

The council terminated its contract early with Neals Travel for the 441 service which was a regular daytime service which operated around Brandon itself and the R1, which was a schoolday-only service, with one journey in each direction between Brandon and Mildenhall.

Comparison of Suffolk Links Brecks with previous bus service

The 441 contract cost £48,996 in council support in 2010-11. A decision was made to discontinue it, in the light of modifications to routes 193 and 200/201, commercially operated alternatives which had significantly limited the passenger benefits of the 441 and R1. A total of 29,291 passenger journeys were made in its last full year of the 441/R1 contract's operation, resulting in a net subsidy per passenger of £1.69.

We do not have a figure for council support for Suffolk Links Brecks in 2011 when it started. However the annual cost of the Suffolk Links Brecks service in 2013-14 was £48,032, excluding vehicle costs, so it is clear that services were not changed here to save significant amounts of money. Some 2679 passenger trips were made on the Suffolk Links Brecks service in 2013-14, resulting in a subsidy per passenger of £21.66.

The withdrawn service had still been used by almost 30,000 passengers in its last full year of operation. It is likely however that some of these passengers would have decided to use the modified commercial routes running along the main roads.

Passenger research

Prior to the introduction of Suffolk Links Wilford in 2009, the council arranged three focus groups in the Bawdsey area to consult on the new service. The events were well-attended with a good cross-section of residents. The 71B service was criticised for being unreliable, for its poor connection to train services, for its shortcomings in getting users to timed healthcare appointments and for its perceived inequitable fares. Some residents had had to resort to paying friends and family to give them lifts into Woodbridge and Ipswich for their weekly shopping. It was noted that taxis were expensive, costing £15 for a one-way trip into Woodbridge. Overall, the idea of the new service was well received with the caveat that it would need to run after 7pm and at weekends to be of significant benefit to residents. A number of concerns were raised about booking arrangements for the new service.

Transport Focus followed up with our own research in March 2015. We interviewed three current and 19 potential users of Suffolk Links Wilford and three current users of Suffolk Links Brecks.

For some, DRT is the only option – there are no other local buses and those which do run can be one or two miles away, meaning they are inaccessible for older and disabled people.

“The only way I can leave the house is with (DRT). I can't walk to the bus stop, and the buses here are so few and far between.”

Current user, Suffolk Links Brecks

In other cases, DRT is regarded as the best option because of cost, availability throughout the day, and practicality when making onward journeys.

“The Brecks is a better service because the Newmarket only goes out to Mildenhall and Newmarket whereas Brecks goes out to Thetford and all of that area.”

Current user, Suffolk Links Brecks

Passengers used Suffolk Links services for a broad range of journey types. Those typically travelling once or twice a week used it for shopping, socialising, medical appointments and to go to the hairdressers. Those travelling two – three times a week used it for commuting to part time work and those using it for onward travel were typically travelling once a week.

“Shopping is the main thing, hospital, doctors appointments, dentist and just to have a cup of tea and a chat!”

Current user, Suffolk Links Brecks

“This service is wonderful, picking me up on Monday, taking me to the train station.”

Current user, Suffolk Links Wilford

Overall, booking is felt to be easy – the booking line has long and convenient opening hours (8am to 4pm Monday to Friday) and it is easy to change or cancel bookings.

“I just ring the girls and they’ll book me in any time I need, it’s great!”

Current user, Suffolk Links Brecks

However, both potential and current users do feel that having to book restricts their ability to make spontaneous journeys.

“Booking is a nuisance, if I called for a doctor’s appointment and they only had one time I wouldn’t be able to go because I wouldn’t get a bus.”

Potential user, Suffolk Links Wilford

There were mixed perceptions about the general availability of the service and convenience of service times, with journey times subject to change depending on later bookings. Some passengers are very happy and find that it is rare that the time they require is unavailable.

“All I have to do is telephone and they work out a route of everyone who wants to be picked up and then they tell them what time they can do it.”

Current user, Suffolk Links Wilford

Others find it can be difficult to get the times they need. Passengers are being told the service is not available at a particular time if there is a conflicting booking rather than the service being rescheduled. Booking staff are not always knowledgeable about the local area meaning they are sometimes perceived to give poor advice on service availability. Booking staff may say a journey isn’t possible, but passengers feel it is, for example.

“They say ‘we can’t get you because the bus isn’t there at that time’, you can never have the time you want”

Current user, Suffolk Links Wilford

The rule that you can only hold two bookings at one time is acceptable for some but can be inconvenient, for example for passengers who need to travel more frequently for work.

“More than nine times out of ten, the service can do what I need them to do.”

Current user, Suffolk Links Wilford

Some misunderstand the booking system and think they can only travel twice a week. This is not the case, but the third booking onwards would need to be made at short notice.

“They have this rule, who made it I don’t know, you can’t make more than two bookings at any one time per week: it’s quite ridiculous for working people.”

Current user, Suffolk Links Wilford

“The only bugbear is that you can only do two bookings.”

Current users, Suffolk Links Wilford

Each passenger is permitted to make up to six bookings more than seven days in advance each year. Some feel that this allocation is sufficient to ensure the service will be available for important appointments. However, others feel they need to ‘save’ their pre-booking allocation in case of an unexpected appointment.

“It’s very difficult with medical appointments because if you’ve used all of your pre-bookings up then you have to wait a week, by which time they are usually fully booked and you have to rearrange your medical appointment and hope that they can do a different day, and repeat the process.”

Current users, Suffolk Links Brecks

Most passengers have a concessionary bus pass (which can be used on the service) and among those who are paying, fares are considered reasonable. Some passengers over 60 have travelled before 9.30am and have therefore paid to use the service.

“Before 9.30 it’s £3. I think this is totally reasonable. I don’t think it should be less.”

Current user, Suffolk Links Wilford

All passengers who are aware of the specific pricing feel it is inexpensive and reasonable given the service they receive.

“I think someone has found out what the prices were on the old bus service and made it so that they are the same.”

Current user, Suffolk Links Wilford

Collecting the majority of passengers from their door or close by ensures that the service is accessible to all and creates the sense of a personalised service. This is particularly beneficial to the large proportion of older or disabled people.

“Picks me up right outside the front gate – they offer a door to door service.”

Current user, Suffolk Links Brecks

“It’s mainly from the bus stop but the driver comes and picks me up from my door.”

Current user, Suffolk Links Wilford

“We go shopping on a Thursday and (the driver) will take the shopping off the bus and bring it inside for us; he’ll help us on and off the bus.”

Current user, Suffolk Links Brecks

Services are never full and occasionally there is only one passenger on board. However, potential users may be put off by the prospect of very long journeys. DRT is perceived not to be family friendly – there is no designated space for pushchairs or guidance on car seats.

“If it’s going to travel around the houses I don’t know! I don’t want to take two hours to make a 20 minute trip.”

Potential user, Suffolk Links Wilford

The lack of a fixed route can be seen as beneficial as on some bookings passengers go directly to their destination without calling at any other stops. But the lack of schedule also means that the arrival time of the service can be variable as it depends on who has booked, making planning challenging.

“If I start work at 9am, they might take me at 8am and I’ll go for a coffee.”

Current user, Suffolk Links Wilford

Older passengers tend to be more flexible and their journeys less time-critical. For younger passengers and those who are working, this could be more frustrating.

When there are multiple stops the route taken is felt to be logical and often more direct than a normal bus service. Drop-off locations are felt to be conveniently situated and useful for making connecting journeys.

The experience of using the DRT service is seen as being more personal and enjoyable than using a conventional bus. Drivers are seen as friendly.

“The drivers are brilliant, especially the man who does Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays – he’s so helpful! We tend to go out shopping on a Thursday and he’ll take the shopping off the bus and bring it inside for us; he’ll help us on and off the bus – he doesn’t just sit there.”

Current user, Suffolk Links Brecks

Regular passengers get to know each other and enjoy the social aspect of the journey itself.

“Everyone is so lovely, friendly and cheerful it kind of makes your day.”

Current user, Suffolk Links Brecks

There is good access for disabled passengers, with an allocated area for wheelchairs and the potential to remove seats to allow

for more wheelchairs and handrails to aid getting on and off the vehicle.

“It has a lift at the back so you can take a wheelchair on – a lot of the elderly are disabled.”

Current user, Suffolk Links Wilford

Most passengers had not experienced any problems booking or making a return journey. One passenger had been unable to book a convenient return journey – this prevented her from travelling on that day.

“The going out journey was fine, but I said I needed to be back in Orford for 2.30pm and they couldn’t do it.”

Potential user, Suffolk Links Wilford

In terms of barriers to use, there was a lack of awareness of DRT among potential passengers. However, the biggest barrier to use in Suffolk seems to be the lack of spontaneity inherent in the DRT service model.

“You shouldn’t have to plan your journey weeks in advance just to get on the bus.”

Potential user, Suffolk Links Wilford

Other barriers identified were:

- service perceived as being for older people
- younger passengers claim they would feel uncomfortable taking children and a pushchair on the service due to perceived lack of space
- perception among some that the running hours are unsociable and limited
- unpredictability due to variable journey length with no guarantee of arrival time
- belief that journeys will be long and make many stops
- assumption that the service will be busy, with limited availability
- booking makes service difficult for visitors to use.

Passengers heard about the changes in a variety of ways, such as posters at bus stops, information stand in local town (Woodbridge), leaflets through the door, information from local councillors and word of mouth. Passengers feel they were given sufficient notice of the changes (about a month) and that there had been good continuity of service.

“I was over the moon when I found out about it, because when the other service went it was very worrying! I thought, how am I going to get anywhere?”

Current user, Suffolk Links Brecks

Passengers in Suffolk seem to recognise that the bus services were not busy enough to be sustainable.

"This is the only thing they could have done with public transport. The buses were mainly empty but (with the DRT), if there was nobody on it, it wouldn't be running."

Current user, Suffolk Links Brecks

Most passengers assume that DRT is a result of living in a remote area where conventional public transport may not be viable. They recognised that buses in the past were not used enough and so were losing money. They also recognised that the high proportion of older passengers on bus services limited fare revenues.

"It must be a hard job dealing with reduced money, but they've done the best they can! It's across the board with lots of things, isn't it? It's lucky that the changes have been for the better!"

Current user, Suffolk Links Brecks

The vast majority feel that given the circumstances DRT is the best thing that could be done and for many it is felt to be better than the previous bus services. When considered in the context of cuts, passengers are even more grateful for the DRT service. However, some are concerned about losing the service as well.

Others feel that their area has borne the brunt of reductions to public transport and they are paying the price of maintaining services in other areas.

"I have read things about (nearest city) getting a lot more buses and things, and I thought "well that's because they're cutting them down round here!"

Current user, Suffolk Links Brecks

Where a conventional bus service runs particularly near to a community there can be a lack of understanding about why they cannot be included on the route.

Case study conclusions

A constantly shifting backdrop of commercial services and conventional services make comparison with the DRT services they have replaced difficult. Staff reductions and changes, combined with limited monitoring of services and inconsistent and changing assumptions behind calculations in particular make it difficult to make a fair comparison between the costs and passenger numbers of DRT. In terms of the crude numbers, it appears that while there are overall cost savings to be made by introducing DRT, there is a significant reduction in the number of passengers when conventional services are withdrawn.

However, it may be possible to both save public money and increase passenger numbers if a wider reorganisation is carried out. Alongside the increase in demand responsive transport, Suffolk County Council has also sought to reduce demand for supported services by encouraging bus operators to modify routes and timetables to make them commercially viable. It has also integrated the number of services providing local bus services and home-to-school transport to maximise efficiencies and make the best use of the resources available.

Passengers pay roughly the same to use Suffolk Links as they did to travel by bus and consider fares reasonable. They can travel anywhere anytime, so are not restricted to the routes and times of the conventional bus; indeed, some villages away from main roads did not previously have a conventional bus service. The largely elderly and disabled clientele particularly appreciate the accessibility of vehicles, the company of other regular passengers, the helpfulness of drivers and the convenience of being dropped off at their front door. However, passengers do have the inconvenience and restriction of having to book in advance and are unable to make spontaneous journeys or change their plans at the last minute. Although there are also limits to the spontaneity which passengers would have been able to exercise in relation to infrequent services. Restrictions introduced to give everyone a fair opportunity are not always understood and appreciated.

Potential users appear to be put off by the unpredictability of journey length and arrival time, particularly where they are making time-critical trips. Younger people tend to view the service as more geared to the needs of older people and make assumptions that journeys will be long, and around the houses, with frequent stops (complaints which are not unique to DRT), and difficult to book.

Publicity designed to increase take-up of DRT, particularly among younger and middle aged people and those going to work and making onward journeys, should tackle these assumptions head-on and carefully consider the practicality of addressing some of these concerns while continuing to meet the needs of current users.

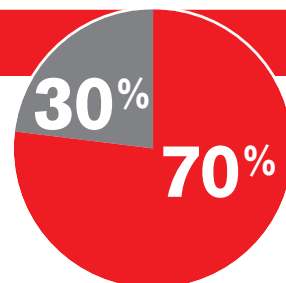
Worcestershire County Council

case study

Background



566000
population



80% of trips are on
busy commercial services



living in urban areas
living in rural areas

Worcestershire is a smaller than average county, with a population of around 566,000.

While the north east of the county, containing the towns of Kidderminster, Stourport and Bromsgrove, is part of the greater West Midlands conurbation, the rest of the county is predominantly rural. The main towns to the south of the county town of Worcester are Evesham and Great Malvern.

Most trips (80 per cent) are on busy commercial bus services, but passengers needing to travel at quieter times or in rural areas rely on Worcestershire County Council to subsidise the services they use.

The council has reviewed the transport needs of its residents and made an assessment of the best way of meeting them as required by section 63 of Transport Act 1985. Cuts in funding from central government and decisions by local politicians have led to a reduction in the council's budget for supporting bus services from £5 million in 2011 to £1.5 million in 2014.

The council consulted on major reductions in bus services in 2011. Each service was scored against the following performance indicators:

- the actual cost per passenger carried
- the average number of passengers on each journey
- the deprivation index for the areas serviced
- the car ownership of the areas served
- the primary journey purpose
- the availability of alternative services for the journey.

From this, they identified a list of proposed changes and reductions which were put to public consultation. A 12 week consultation in 2011 received over 2500 responses and was followed by a second consultation, lasting four weeks, on revised proposals. The first consultation proposed the withdrawal of 72 bus services; following public comments, the second consultation proposed just 25 services be withdrawn, alongside reductions to hours of operation and frequency on other routes. We regarded the consultation as an example of best practice.

The council has worked with operators to redesign commercial services and has merged supported services with home school transport contracts. It carried out a consultation on further major reductions in 2013-14. An impressive 8500 responses were received. Changes were announced in June 2014 and implemented in September 2014. Support for marginal bus services which failed the value for money test was cut. But the council is determined to supplement a basic level of bus services with a 'lifeline' service to its most isolated communities. This has been done through a combination of conventional buses and DRT.

In addition to DRT, the council also supports a number of other flexible schemes, such as Dial-a-Ride (in the main urban areas), volunteer car schemes via a strategic grant and taxi contracts for older people and those with special needs, funded by social services.

Demand responsive services

Conventional bus services have retrenched over the years. Community transport has been introduced to provide an alternative to these marginal conventional bus services.

The council provides a grant to the Community Transport Partnership. This grant was reduced year on year from £250,000 in 2010 to £150,000 in 2015-16. It contributes to the cost of eight main schemes.

DRT community transport is provided under section 19 of the Transport Act 1985. Services are operated by minibuses mostly driven by volunteers but some have paid staff. They operate in a similar way to a bus, except that users need to register and book in advance.

Fares are based on bus fares – passengers with concessionary passes can travel at a discount.

Case studies: we looked at two demand responsive services – community bus CB6 from Tenbury Wells to Kidderminster and minibus service from Malvern to Cheltenham and Gloucester. Both services started in 2014.

Description of CB6 service

Community bus CB6 connects Tenbury Wells (at the county's western border with Herefordshire and Shropshire) with Kidderminster (in the north of the county towards the Staffordshire border). It is now run as a demand responsive service by the Tenbury Transport Trust and replaces conventional bus service 760 which ran between Tenbury Wells and Kidderminster, and was withdrawn following a passenger survey when the contract came to an end prior to August 2014.

The council also supports the 291 service which runs six times a day, Monday to Friday, with four journeys on Saturdays, along the main road between Tenbury Wells and Kidderminster. The CB6 service takes in all of the very rural areas not catered for on this 'main road' route.

The CB6 runs once a week on a Thursday, leaving Tenbury Wells at 8.45am and arriving at Kidderminster at 9.53am, returning at 1.15pm. The previous bus (760) also ran once a week in each direction.

Tenbury Transport Trust charges £5 for a single journey on the CB6 and £10 for a return journey, reduced by £2 each way for concessionary pass holders.

Comparison of CB6 with previous bus service

The cost to the authority of the 760 route was £94.20 per day, or £15,052 a year. We were unable to ascertain the number of passenger journeys over a full year. However, surveys revealed a

declining patronage with only two passengers travelling when the contract ceased, although there had been as many as 13 single passenger journeys. Most passengers made return journeys. The subsidy per passenger has been as high as £20.29.

The gross cost of the CB6 service which replaced this service between June 2014 when it started and April 2015 was £5,276 for 713 passenger trips, representing a subsidy of £7.40 per passenger journey.

Adult single fares on the 760 were £1.50 for the shorter journeys and £2.50 for the longer ones. However, all passengers had concessionary passes – there was no onboard income.

Villages off the main roads between Tenbury Wells and Kidderminster (A456) and Worcester (A443) are completely reliant on the CB6.

All but one of the CB6 users travels with a concessionary pass and most are elderly and/or with limited mobility. Most are making shopping trips into Kidderminster.

Description of Cheltenham and Gloucester minibus

The Cheltenham and Gloucester 16-seater minibus service (CB2) runs between Malvern (in the south west of the county near the Herefordshire border), and Cheltenham and Gloucester (over the county's southern border with Gloucestershire) with pick-ups available from a large number of villages in southern Worcestershire along the route. It is run by Community Action Malvern and District (CAMD).

CB2 runs once a week on a Thursday, arriving in Gloucester at about 10.45 and on to Cheltenham for 11 am, returning from Cheltenham at 1:50pm and Gloucester at 2.15pm. Services range from £3 single, £5 return for shorter journeys to £4 single, £6 return for longer ones. Concessionary pass holders are entitled to a £1 reduction per single journey if they live outside Malvern Hills or a £2 reduction if they live in Malvern Hills.

It replaces a conventional bus service 377 which ran between Great Malvern, Gloucester and Cheltenham, operated by LMS Travel, once a week on a Saturday. Adult single fares on the 377 were £2 (£1.50 for under 19s), with returns at £2.50 (£2 for under 19s). Around 35 per cent of passengers were concessionary pass holders.

Comparison of Cheltenham & Gloucester minibus with previous service

According to data attached to the November 2013 cabinet paper seeking approval to go out to public consultation on reductions to bus services, a total of 1888 passengers used the once weekly 377 service. This came at a net cost to the council of £12,820 per year, representing a subsidy of £6.79 per passenger journey, the second-highest cost per passenger of any of Worcestershire's bus contracts. In June 2014 the council approved its replacement with a minibus, partly because Malvern residents had trains and other buses that would take them into Worcester (as well as several shopping centres in Malvern).

The CB2 service which replaced it costs £1,002 per month – a similar sum to the 377 – but it cannot be compared completely with the previous service because this DRT route also takes in several other communities which were affected by bus service cuts. For example it serves Sledge Green where there is a residential park of 42 properties that had lost its (Saturday only) Hereford – Gloucester service and bus to Ledbury (a Herefordshire contract).

In addition CAMD ran the CB1 service to Tewkesbury until it replaced it with the CB2, still serving some of the villages but taking passengers to Cheltenham and Gloucester rather than Tewkesbury. This amalgamation of routes enables those very rural communities to the south west of the county to still have access to major shopping centres, even if these may not be those they travelled to previously. The service carries 11-12 people per week, plus their shopping and shopping trolleys.

Villages to the south of the A4014 and to the west of the A38 have no conventional bus service and therefore rely on the minibus.

The service essentially provides an opportunity for its regular users to go shopping in Gloucester and Cheltenham. Currently, all but one tend to be concessionary pass holders.



Passenger research

We interviewed two current and two potential users of CB6 and nine current users and ten potential users of the Cheltenham and Gloucester minibus.

The timetabled minibus DRT services researched in Worcestershire are very close to the previous conventional bus service in terms of scheduling, route, and process of using the service which seems to have made transition easier for users.

For most current or potential respondents in Worcestershire, DRT was either their only or best transport option – these groups are the core DRT audience. Limited public transport seems to be accepted as part of the reality of living rurally (as a non-driver). Interestingly, some people living on the edge of town a long way from their nearest bus stop found DRT an attractive option.

Many passengers interviewed were totally dependent on the DRT service for transportation. Respondents reported that DRT services were meeting their needs for frequency.

“If you stopped this (service) I’d be lumbered.”

Current user, CB6

“Overall, it’s better because I don’t have to walk down town for the bus. It probably takes me a good half hour to walk down.”

Current user, CB6

“I mean I could drive but it is much nicer, you haven’t got to worry about the parking or anything like that. The time suits me, it is cheaper.”

Current user, Cheltenham and Gloucester minibus

Service use seems to be for shopping trips as the service is too infrequent/irregular to be useful for other journey purposes. While a weekly service cannot meet all their needs, passengers seemed able to make alternative arrangements where necessary and were focused on the positives of the service running, rather than any unmet needs. Passengers seem willing and able to plan weekly shopping trips in advance or visit a relative in a nearby town. However, the service is less useful for attending medical appointments and does not help with access to evening leisure activities.

“At one time you could get on that bus route and it would go to Worcester and then the hospital. Then all of a sudden, with cutbacks, we lost the connection from Malvern to the hospital.”

Current user, Cheltenham and Gloucester minibus

Having to book seems to have a limited impact on DRT passengers, as it is very easy for them to do so. They did not raise any issues. Potential users see booking as a benefit as it guarantees that the bus will arrive and there will be a seat for them.

"You just ring up Community Action and book a seat, it's very easy. I just ring and that's fine."

Current user, Cheltenham and Gloucester

"Ringin' up to book would be fine."

Potential user, Cheltenham and Gloucester minibus

Concessionary bus pass users do have to pay to use these DRT services, but this does not seem to act as a deterrent to use, even amongst those on a limited income. Amongst respondents the concessionary bus pass seems to be viewed as a privilege rather than a right, and so they were happy to pay a small additional fare to make these journeys. However, there was some anecdotal evidence that some local residents who had used the previous service were unwilling to use the CB6 as they would have to pay.

"I would be more than prepared to pay, oh yes, I think everybody else would be. I think it is a general feeling. If there is a choice between no service and paying, we're prepared to pay."

Current users, Cheltenham and Gloucester minibus

"The price was incredibly reasonable at £2, I wouldn't even have batted an eyelid if it was a fiver for that journey."

Potential user, Cheltenham and Gloucester minibus

Passengers feel they get a more personal service than on conventional bus services which makes the journey more enjoyable. There is a perception that the service is more punctual than the previous bus service and when there are delays the office informs passengers. Pick-up and drop-off points are in very convenient places and closer than the regular bus service where this exists. Passengers praised the friendliness and helpfulness of drivers on DRT services. Staff helping passengers on and off the service, helping load trolleys on to the bus, picking up and dropping off to their front door in bad weather was highlighted as particularly useful.

"It's very easy (to use the service). If (the driver) knows you're coming and you are not there, he will walk down and check or he will phone you. If it is late, they will phone me saying "I am sorry I'm going to be ten minutes late."

Current user, Cheltenham and Gloucester minibus

"It is a very good service, the drivers are volunteers, they do anything you want them to do, you know, drive out of their way...so that is very good."

Current user, Cheltenham and Gloucester minibus

Routes are felt to be suitably direct, often more direct than the previous service. Knowing which passengers will be getting on in advance allows drivers to alter the route, missing out stops if particular passengers are not due to get on.

"It's handy and runs on time. It's quicker to Kidderminster (than the conventional bus service)."

Current user, CB6

Passengers enjoy the scenery. The journey itself is an enjoyable social experience as there are often familiar faces on the journey. Some feel that the smaller physical space of the minibus encourages greater social interaction.

"Today there was seven or eight of us and we were all chatting away, the driver was happy and he was having a chat with a gentleman. It was so nice."

Current user, Cheltenham and Gloucester minibus

As there is one outward and one return service per week DRT users have only a fixed amount of time at their destination. Both services allow about three hours at the destination. This time typically allows passengers to complete their shopping, then head back to the bus for the return journey. Although more flexibility would be preferred, the time spent at the destination is generally accepted as the service is known to be run by volunteers. However, this is also perceived to be a barrier to greater uptake of the service from potential users.

"I think 1.50pm is a little bit early to come back. That's not really enough time to walk around and do your shopping."

Potential user, Cheltenham and Gloucester minibus

Overall, passengers seem to find that their service fits well with their lifestyle and really enjoy the experience of using it.

"It is supposed to (come back) at quarter past one, but if everyone's on the bus it comes back early anyway because they know how many are on the bus. We come back earlier usually."

Current user, CB6

"We catch it up at the shops, but it will drop us back at our doors."

Current user, CB6

Lack of awareness of the service seems to be the main barrier to use among potential users. Once they are aware of it, the service seems appealing.

"I didn't know there was a bus that ran that way. It sounds like a good service for anyone who wanted to go into Gloucester and Cheltenham... it's really a pleasant, pretty journey that way, too."

Potential user, Cheltenham and Gloucester minibus

"I think (the service is) suitable for anyone who is 25"

and over, and wants a day out without any car... I'd definitely recommend it."

Potential user, Cheltenham and Gloucester minibus

One potential user who made a journey really enjoyed it. However, some of those with access to a car perceived booking as a hassle.

All seemed to recognise that the previous service had not been busy enough to be sustainable.

"There were cutbacks at (the bus service). The majority of people using the service were bus pass holders, so they weren't getting enough money: they said they were losing £50 every time they ran the service."

Current user, CB6

A plan for DRT services seems not to have been in place when the bus service was withdrawn and there was a period of uncertainty about what would happen. However new services were put in place quickly enough to make the transition feel seamless and provide good continuity of service. This seems to have contributed to positive recollections of the transition period among passengers.

The similarities between the services means that passengers do not seem to perceive there to be any substantial difference between the CB6 and 'conventional' bus services which ran previously.

"When the R&B finished, they... I think one of the ladies off the bus approached these people and they decided to put the bus on for us. It's the only bus she has."

Current user, CB6

"When I filled in the form to start with I said I'd be using it every week. I only let them know if I'm not going for the bus."

Current user, CB6

Passengers heard from fellow passengers or the bus driver that the previous service to Cheltenham was ending. Community meetings were held and local councillors lobbied for a replacement service. Passengers were made aware that replacing the service was more challenging with services crossing county lines which raised issues about which local authority would subsidise the service. When towns are equidistant this can seem arbitrary and frustrating. However, community transport organisations may provide a way of providing these services where local authorities cannot.

The previous services ran on Wednesday and Saturday. The DRT service now only runs on a Thursday as it is harder to find volunteer bus drivers on a weekend. There is only one return service a week when there had been two previously. The previous service had allowed for greater flexibility and more

options, for example onward travel, spending longer in town. However, passengers are grateful for any service they can get.

"A (Saturday service) would be useful but I sort of altered my weekly life style, you know, to accommodate it."

Current user, Cheltenham and Gloucester minibus

Passengers were generally aware that changes to their local public transport service was a result of cuts to local public spending. Current and potential passengers generally seem to believe that the DRT service is the best way the local authority could have handled the restricted budget for local transport. Many feel that DRT is an improvement on previous bus services on the basis of the benefits outlined earlier which allow for a positive, albeit restricted, user experience. Some passengers do query the transport strategy when some services are running every ten minutes and others are completely cut back.

"You can see buses leaving Worcester every few minutes... So it makes you think, why do they need so many buses, when there are so few here?"

Potential user, Cheltenham and Gloucester minibus

Passengers on county borders felt that they have fallen into a black spot for service provision.

Case study conclusions

In terms of the crude numbers, it appears that there are overall cost savings to be made by introducing DRT, with volunteer drivers and smaller vehicles, but there is some reduction in the number of passengers when conventional services are withdrawn. However, in Worcestershire the services we looked at were replacing buses which only ran very occasionally in any case so the change was not that great.

Passengers pay more than they did to travel by bus, but most of the people we spoke to still considered the fares to be reasonable. Those who live on or near the main road have a regular conventional bus service into their nearest big town, as before. Some villages away from main roads did not previously have a conventional bus service, so they have gained as a result.

The largely elderly and disabled clientele particularly appreciate the company of other regular passengers, the helpfulness of drivers and the convenience of being dropped off at their front door. They perceive the services to be more punctual and often more direct. Although passengers do have the inconvenience and restriction of having to book in advance, few seem to mind this.

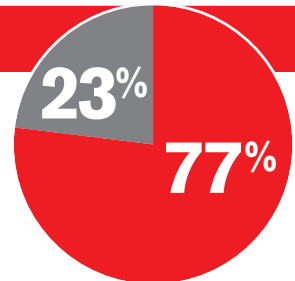
It is felt that some potential users may be put off by the shortage of time at the destination. However, lack of awareness appears to be the main barrier to use.

Hampshire County Council taxi share case study

Background



1.3M population



86% of trips are on busy commercial services



living in urban areas
living in rural areas

Hampshire is the third largest shire county in England with a population of around 1.3 million. Most of the population (77 per cent) live in urban areas, including the Solent (Eastleigh, Fareham, Gosport, Havant and the New Forest Waterside), Basingstoke (in the north of county), Winchester (in the south) and the Blackwater Valley (Farnborough-Aldershot) axis. The area is predominantly rural (85 per cent). It is an affluent county, with higher than average car ownership, but there are some areas of multiple deprivation.

Six out of seven trips are on busy commercial bus services, but passengers needing to travel at quieter times or in rural areas rely on Hampshire County Council to subsidise the services they use.

Hampshire's supported bus network is based on a thorough analysis of the transport needs of its residents and an assessment of the best ways of meeting them. A major county-wide review was carried out, district-by-district in 2006-07, to inform cost savings of £500,000. This used survey, census, demographic and accessibility data. Network options were developed and assessed for accessibility against a scoring matrix, and a financial comparison made. Conventional local bus services (both commercial and supported) were included, as well as demand responsive services. There was full engagement with partners and stakeholders.

Subsequent reviews have been carried out as part of Hampshire's budget-setting exercise, with an increasing emphasis on consultation. A major bus subsidy review was carried out between February and May 2011. The consultation invited individuals, representative organisations, parish councils and district authorities to provide feedback on where best to target the council's bus budget which was reducing from £6.7 million to £4.5 million. Response forms were widely distributed 515 replies were received from individuals and 92 from stakeholder organisations, plus a further 150 emailed responses. Feedback was used to inform a package of services that were tendered towards the end of the year.

A further passenger transport review was carried out between March and May 2014 on a reduction in the bus budget from £4.7 million to £3.2 million. Consultation questions, informed by well-attended discussions with the public, included the impact of withdrawing evening and Sunday services,

reducing printed publicity, limiting concessionary passes to the statutory 9.30am requirement and of replacing supported bus services with DRT. A total of 3217 individual responses were received to the consultation, plus almost 200 stakeholder organisations. The council held detailed discussions with bus operators and found 40 per cent savings through the process, in some cases on the back of frequency reductions. Marginal bus services which have failed the value for money test were cut. Changes were introduced in January 2015.

The council also recognised the scope for achieving savings by using community transport and demand responsive services. They asked the community transport sector to come forward with proposals. The council was determined to offer a 'lifeline' service to its most isolated communities to ensure that everybody has access to a transport service of some sort. So where the community transport sector was unable or unwilling to do so, the council introduced taxi share to plug the gaps in transport provision.

Overall, Hampshire spends £900,000 on community transport, boosted by a £400,000 contribution from district councils.

Taxi share

Taxi share, or car share, has stepped in where community transport has been unable or unwilling to provide an alternative to these marginal conventional bus services. It is available in Basingstoke, East Hampshire, Eastleigh, Fareham, Hart, Havant, New Forest, Test Valley and Winchester.

Taxi share is provided under section 11 of the Transport Act 1985. It operates in a similar way to a bus service but passengers need to register and book in advance, and the service is operated by a taxi instead of a bus. Most services operate to a set timetable and will run even if there is only one passenger; however, they will not run if nobody has booked them.

Although mainly used by those living in the areas served, taxi share and car share are public transport services and could be used by visitors or those travelling into the area.

Trips are mainly local, although some allow time for connections to longer-distance services. Some services follow a fixed route but others offer more of a door-to-door service within a 'roam zone'. Most have a single, fixed destination but some journeys offer a range of stops to include health centres etc.

Although the start time for older persons' passes in Hampshire became 9.30am from April 2015, infrequent services, which include most taxi share services are included in the list of services where travel is allowed from 9am.

Hampshire uses both commercial taxi operators and community transport operators to provide taxi share services according to which is best placed and most cost effective to provide a particular service. A mixture of cars, people carriers and minibuses are used according to how busy a particular service is. Generally the taxi operators, who are only paid if

a service runs, are the most cost effective option and are certainly cheaper than a conventional bus service.

The council has provided a self-help kit to support parishes and other groups that wish to promote and develop community transport in their area. Services are included in local timetable booklets, and increasingly as part of the Traveline journey planner.

There are 30 taxi shares serving 60 communities providing 31,000 passenger trips a year at a cost of £244,000 per year, although a further £120,000 is currently available if passenger demand increases.

In addition to taxi share the council supports a number of other demand responsive schemes, including:

- Call and Go: a bookable accessible minibus service available in certain areas for those who do not have a local bus service when they need to travel
- Cango bus service: demand responsive, accessible and flexible service available in certain areas
- community buses: accessible vehicles driven by volunteers, available in certain areas
- dial-a-ride: a door-to-door service for people unable to use mainstream transport
- minibuses for hire from voluntary organisations
- volunteer car schemes: provided across the county by voluntary organisations.

The number of passenger journeys on supported services (currently 4.6 million per year) has reduced from 5.6m per year since 2010/11, while the number of commercial journeys (28.1m) has increased. Community transport is responsible for 500,000 trips. Passenger trip numbers on other schemes are:

- dial-a-ride, Call and Go and community bus: 115,000
- minibus group hire: 256,000
- Cango: 72,000
- volunteer car schemes: 98,000.

Case studies: we looked at two taxi share services, Southwick Area and Fordingbridge, which were neither the most nor least used taxi shares. Both services started up in 2011.

Description of Southwick service

Southwick area taxishare (38) connects Wickham, south of Winchester, with Cosham, to the north of Portsmouth in the south east of the county. It is run by the Acacia Cars taxi firm, under contract to Hampshire County Council.

It replaces a conventional bus service (38) which ran between Fareham, Cosham and Waterlooville and service 138 between Southwick and Fareham, via Wickham.

The Southwick service runs twice a day in each direction Monday to Friday; the previous bus ran five times a day in each direction, six days a week.

The timetable was totally redesigned and extra peak-time journeys added following a series of meetings with parish councillors and other local representatives and in line with their suggestions. There are now daily peak services for college students and commuters. Daily off-peak journeys also allow passengers time to connect and shop in Portsmouth if they wish as well as journeys to and from the doctor's surgery in Wickham which the group arranged.

Tickets range from £1.30 single and £2.20 return (between any two villages) and £4.30 single to £6.50 return to go all the way from Wickham to Cosham. Concessionary passes are accepted.

Comparison of Southwick taxi share with previous bus service

According to a review of service 38 – 38A – 138 between Fareham and Cosham/Waterlooville in 2007-08, a total of 25,152 passengers used the service, at a net cost to the council of £86,613 per year, representing a subsidy of £3.20 per passenger journey.

The gross cost of the taxi share which replaced this service was £9,246 in 2014-15 for 1170 passenger trips, representing a subsidy of £6.34 per passenger journey.

Description of Fordingbridge service

Fordingbridge taxi share (61/62) connects up people in the villages around Fordingbridge in the New Forest in the south west of the county. It is run by the Red Express taxi firm, under contract to Hampshire County Council.

It replaces service 41 which ran between Alderholt and Salisbury via Fordingbridge, Downton and Breamore, run by Wilts and Dorset bus company.

The Fordingbridge taxi share operates once a day in each direction on Tuesdays, Fridays and Saturdays only, linking villages to the east of Fordingbridge. It also operates once a day in each direction on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays only, linking villages to the west. The service connects up with the X3 bus at Fordingbridge, enabling passengers to travel on to Salisbury and back. Previously they had one bus a day twice a week at 10am on Tuesday and Saturday to Salisbury, and one bus a day at 10.30am on Tuesday and Saturday between Blandford and Salisbury.

Tickets range from £1.50 single and £2 return (between any two villages) and £2.80 single to £4 return (for longer journeys).

Comparison of Fordingbridge taxi share with previous service

The gross cost of the taxi share was £17,366 in 2014-15 for 1611 passenger trips, representing a subsidy of £10.78 per passenger journey.

Unfortunately we were unable to obtain comparative figures for the 41 bus.

Passenger research

We interviewed three current users and two potential users of Southwick taxi share; and seven current and 11 potential users of Fordingbridge taxi share.

The changes to public transport serving the Fordingbridge and Southwick areas have led to restrictions in the destinations served by public transport. Residents can no longer easily travel to Salisbury or Southampton as the commercial service to Southampton was withdrawn. Residents feel that the changes to public transport have restricted their options. Passengers now travel where the service goes, rather than where they want to go.

Passengers tend to be completely reliant on the service and use it for shopping, hair appointments, doctors and dentist appointments, visiting the bank and trips to the post office. Most passengers say they tend to use the service about three times a week. Those with mobility issues are mainly making essential trips (bank, doctor) about once a week or less often.

Outward and return journey times vary depending on the day of the week and allow two–three hours at their destination. As the taxi share service is less frequent than the previous bus service it offers much less flexibility. Among potential passengers, service times appear to be a barrier to use. Services start too late to be useful for the school run, though the Southwick taxi share does provide peak-time journeys for college students.

For some passengers the time allowed at the destination is sufficient, but others feel that they have had to curtail their social and leisure activities.

“You're limited for time. If you went to Wickham and got a bus to Winchester, you don't have any time to do any shopping or anything in Winchester before you've got to be back for the taxi share.”

Current user, Southwick taxi share

Passengers sometimes find that they need to pay for a private taxi home if the service does not run at a convenient time for them to return. The council has responded by altering the route of one of its scheduled supported services to pick up passengers who want to come back later.

There is a mixed reception to booking. Some do not mind, but others find it restricts their spontaneity. Passengers have not been able to make bookings on the day of travel. For Southwick users this makes arranging doctor's appointments particularly tricky as often only same day appointments are available.

“You can't do anything on the spur of the moment.”

Current user, Southwick taxi share

“You ring up the day before to say you want picking up at 9am, and they say they can't do it or they can.”

Current user, Fordingbridge taxi share



All current passengers interviewed were concessionary pass holders. While many passengers are able to use the service for free, they sometimes find that they have to pay for a taxi home due to inconvenient service times. To reach a preferred destination passengers sometimes pay the taxi driver an additional sum (£2) to take them to Fareham.

“It’s quite good because it’s only supposed to go as far as Wickham, but if you give them a few extra quid they’ll take you to Fareham which is nice of them.”

Current user, Southwick taxi share

For potential passengers, who would have to pay to use the service, fares seem reasonable as the service is cheaper than the local bus – however, the service is less flexible.

“The prices are good but it needs to be more frequent.”

Potential user, Fordingbridge taxi share

Passengers in Fordingbridge are collected from their home and this is appreciated.

“The best part is that they pick you up at the door and bring you back to your door.”

Current user, Fordingbridge taxi share

Routes are felt to be too direct, meaning journeys feel more purposeful with less opportunity to enjoy the scenery and experience. For older passengers in rural areas part of the pleasure of making trips seems to be the experience of seeing different places as much as arriving at the destination.

“(Previous bus service) was a picturesque route.”

Potential user, Southwick taxi share

The journey feels less social than the previous bus service. As the service is provided by taxis there is no guarantee that you will see the same fellow passengers each week even if they are making a journey at the same time – passengers miss seeing their friends.

“It was quite chatty that bus (previous bus service), we saw people that we knew.”

Potential user, Southwick taxi share

There is no regular driver and there seems to be variation in the friendliness and helpfulness of drivers.

“I know that when it changed, nobody liked it at all. We used to have some super bus drivers, you get to know them and they’d drop you off anywhere you like. The taxi share is fine, it does a job.”

Current user, Southwick taxi share

Accessible vehicles are available – passengers should specify that they need an accessible vehicle when registering. Although the services state that wheelchairs and pushchairs can be accommodated, passengers do not feel comfortable about this and feel that the use of a taxi restricts accessibility. For older passengers cars are less accessible than buses and minibuses as the seats are lower down and this can be a harder movement to make.

“I like to use buses more than taxis. I struggle to get into taxis.”

Current user, Southwick taxi share

Passengers also feel restricted in the amount of shopping they can bring on the service as the space available feels limited.

“They’d get on the taxi with a shopping cart but not with a wheelchair or pram.”

Current user, Southwick taxi share

There was low awareness of the services among potential users. Door-to-door collection made them view taxi share as a service for older and disabled people – potential passengers felt a seat would be ‘wasted’ on them. The limited destinations and times are not felt to meet their needs.

“The people benefiting are OAPs who want to do a bit of shopping or go to a cup of tea place or club in the morning. It may benefit mothers who haven’t got transport, but it’s very limited.”

Potential user, Fordingbridge taxi share

Being run by a taxi firm seems to create a perception among some that the service will operate on demand like a taxi rather than like a bus service with fixed times.

“I wouldn’t try and book again. For work, I’d want an earlier taxi and it seems a long time stranded in Fordingbridge if I only need to be there an hour or so.”

Potential user, Fordingbridge taxi share

Passengers in Fordingbridge did perceive their bus service to be under-used with a high proportion of concessionary pass holders. Changes seem to have been more positively received as the rationale for making changes was better understood. There was some low level dissatisfaction with how changes were communicated – passengers felt that there was no opportunity to discuss proposed changes.

“Word of mouth is alright to a certain extent, but I think a printed notice that comes to your house would be good. Then it’s up to you to file it so you know you’ve got it.”

Current user, Fordingbridge taxi share

“It would have been nice if they’d have said “meet us outside the village hall at this time and we can talk it through” and they could’ve answered any questions. But it just faded away and we were left high and dry.”

Current user, Fordingbridge taxi share

However, some passengers in Southwick feel that there has been a lack of transparency about the changes and the negative perceptions of the introduction of the service may colour how passengers feel about it. There was some suspicion about an on-bus survey, while the notice announcing the changes in the

local paper was ‘very small’.

“They did it underhanded. They had people doing surveys on the buses. If you asked them if the buses were going to stop they’d say oh no. We all said that was the end.”

Current user, Southwick taxi share

“They called a meeting in the village hall. This was pointless because it was already a done deal by then.”

Current user, Southwick taxi share

“The survey people put down that there were four people on the bus when actually there were 12. There were more people on that bus. The survey people were never there on Mondays, which is market day, the busiest. I think they were looking for things to cover it up.”

Current user, Southwick taxi share

The council has commented that the previous bus service was surveyed on Mondays, and on every other day of the week, as part of its rolling survey programme. It also looked at bus operator electronic ticket machine data and it strongly refutes any suggestion that it deliberately reduced passenger figures.

Respondents say they have protested and complained about the changes but to no avail. They feel completely ‘cut off’ and they feel that villages where county councillors live get a much better bus service than they do.

“Quite a few councillors live in Denmead and funnily enough their bus service didn’t get cut.”

Potential user, Southwick taxi share

Respondents also resent that there is one bus which comes through the village but does not stop, and one which comes very nearby. Respondents feel that buses in Winchester have been preserved at the cost of rural bus services.

“There is a bus service from the next village they could divert and pick us up in Southwick. They’ve cut our village out completely.”

Potential user, Southwick taxi share

Passengers felt that their bus was sufficiently busy and actually wanted more services not fewer – as such they find it hard to support the decision to remove the service. Passengers feel that using a taxi service to replace a bus is a costly approach and means that their council tax is going to a private firm.

“Our taxes are subsidising the taxi companies rather than going into the pot to provide us a decent bus service.”

Potential user, Southwick taxi share

Residents feel generally that while they pay high council tax rates, services to their area are cut while services in other areas are prioritised. Residents do not understand why a service can come through/close to their village and not stop.

“We come under Winchester and pay as much council tax but we get nothing. We don’t get anything for our money whereas in Winchester they’ve got buses and trains.”

Current user, Southwick taxi share

Case study conclusions

Hampshire County Council provides taxi share services for those communities which would otherwise not have a public transport link. Taxi share serves these areas due to the withdrawal of a commercial bus service or of a subsidised bus service which did not meet value for money criteria. Taxi share is designed to provide a link for essential needs such as food shopping or collecting prescriptions – it is not intended to replace a bus service to a larger centre though time is allowed to make a connection and return. Taxi share can provide a lifeline service for predictable, non-discretionary journeys, making use of spare capacity without having to run empty. With ever-reducing budgets available to subsidise local transport it represents a significant tool to help councils ensure that nobody is cut off completely if they do not have a car.

Although we were unable to make a ‘before and after’ comparison in Fordingbridge, it appears from Southwick that while there are substantial overall cost savings to be made by introducing taxi share, there is also a significant reduction in the number of passengers when conventional services are withdrawn.

Passengers do not pay any more to use taxi share than they did to travel by bus and they consider fares reasonable; concessionary passengers are still able to travel for free. Fordingbridge passengers have lost their direct bus to Salisbury, but the taxi does connect with another bus which takes them there. Some of the villages benefiting from taxi share which are off the main road did not previously have a conventional bus service. Southwick taxi share runs much less frequently than the bus it replaced.

Taxi share is reasonably priced and the timings work for some passengers, but the lack of flexibility leads some to give the driver extra money to take them to where they want to go or pay for a return taxi at a more suitable time. The requirement to book the day before rules out spontaneous trips and is out of step with many ‘same day’ doctor’s appointments. Passengers appreciate the convenience of being dropped at their front door by the taxi. However, some commented that it was easier to get in and out of buses than taxis and there was disappointment that taxi journeys are less social than the bus. The change to taxis

has removed the direct, personal connection that they had had with their regular bus driver. Perhaps counter-intuitively some complained that journeys were too direct.

There was low awareness of the services among potential users in the areas examined. Door-to-door collection on these routes made them view taxi share as a service for older and disabled people. The limited destinations and times are not felt to meet their needs. The challenge is how to make taxi share as visible as the 400,000 annual community transport trips in badged vehicles.

Method

In each case, we used the available data to evaluate the performance of the DRT services against the previously available conventional bus services:

- assessing the conventional services previously available, in terms of the number of passengers carried and the cost per passenger
- assessing the DRT services in a similar way
- where possible, breaking down costs and identifying where principal savings arise when using demand-responsive transport, for example vehicle costs, driver costs, fuel costs
- establishing what performance monitoring each authority carries out of its DRT services, including assessments against social need criteria
- inviting any suggestions from the authority or provider as to how DRT services might be made more cost effective.

We then commissioned independent research to discover the opinions of passengers and non-users about the specific DRT services we had looked at. We wanted to understand:

- passengers' motivation for using public transport in general
- how public transport provision has changed over recent years in their experience
- passengers' experience of using public transport following the changes due to the cuts to local public transport budgets
- passengers' awareness of, and views on, local authorities' decisions around public transport following the cuts to their budgets.

We used a mixed 'qualitative' approach, consisting of:

- in-depth interviews with current DRT service users (19 in total with six or seven interviews in each location)
- in-depth interviews with potential DRT services users in each location (12 in total comprising four interviews in each location), defined as those who are not currently using the service but are open to public transport use
- qualitative door-to-door interviews with current and potential users (45 in total with 13-17 in each location).

This report draws upon conclusions and recommendations which have emerged from case studies in Suffolk, Worcestershire and Hampshire.

Some findings are consistent across the three case studies; others vary depending on the model adopted.

Suffolk is introducing new contracts this year, so findings need to be read within that context. However, we were still keen to capture the county's experience of DRT over the last few years.

Like-for-like comparisons with conventional services can be difficult: where DRT has been introduced as part of a wider reorganisation, it may be more appropriate to compare a full package of services operating in the area.



Contact Transport Focus

Fleetbank House
2-6 Salisbury Square
London EC4Y 8JX

t 0300 123 0860

w www.transportfocus.org.uk

Transport Focus is the operating
name of the Passengers' Council

Published in June 2016
© 2016 Transport Focus

Design and Print by **TU ink** www.tuink.co.uk