



***fflecsi* – the experience of Demand Responsive Transport in Wales**

Interim report
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TRAFNIDIAETH CYMRU
TRANSPORT FOR WALES

transport**focus**
ffocws ar dtrafnidiaeth

Background and introduction

Transport Focus Wales has been working with Transport for Wales to assess the experience of Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) following the introduction of a number of pilot schemes under the fflecsi brand in Wales in 2020¹. We also looked at two schemes in England for comparison – *Tees Flex* in the Tees Valley² and *Go2* around Sevenoaks.

We interviewed passengers and potential passengers, and spoke to operators and local authorities (some participating in the *fflecsi* pilot and some not). The *fflecsi* schemes

in our research cover the Denbigh, Pembrokeshire (not including *Bwcabus* which has since joined the *fflecsi* family) and Conwy Valley areas.

An expanded *fflecsi* operation launched in Newport in 2021. We plan to review this once the operation has settled down and passengers have become accustomed to the experience of a flexible bus service, probably in early 2022.

As there is significant interest in DRT amongst governments, local authorities and operators, we are sharing this interim summary now so they can use the learnings gained so far.

¹ More details regarding *fflecsi* can be found on the scheme's website, <https://www.fflecsi.wales/>; please note that some schemes are referred to as IRT - Integrated Responsive Transport – and seek to integrate flexible bus services with existing, scheduled bus, train and coach services.

² Excluding Middlesbrough

Forewords



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The Welsh Government is keen to explore Demand and Integrated Responsive Transport (DRT/IRT) as part of the public transport mix. It is looking at how DRT/IRT can provide services in rural communities as well as open up new opportunities and connections with existing bus and rail services across the country.

Working with partners in local authorities and bus operators and with the technology platform supplier, this method of delivering public transport has been a fast-learning curve for all involved in the project. The implementation of the services during a pandemic was a challenge, but as we increased our understanding of the capabilities of the technology, listened to feedback from passengers and began to communicate the benefits of this new type of service to potential customers, we began to see an increase in uptake across all the pilot services.

Fflecsi services provided a lifeline during the pandemic to many passengers needing to make essential journeys. The services remained popular as we began to move out of the pandemic, with usage still continuing to grow in most cases. The pilots are ongoing and still evolving, and we look forward to having the findings from the more recent Newport operation to complete our assessment of *fflecsi* in 2022.

We are encouraged by the observations in this interim report. It adds to our understanding of what has worked well despite the difficult circumstances of the pandemic, what did not go quite so well, and where we can look to make improvements in the future.

Lee Robinson

Development Director for Mid, North and Rural Wales



Transport Focus Wales gives focus and energy to representing the interests of Welsh transport users. We are pleased to work with Transport for Wales (TfW) as it launches a number of pilot schemes under the *fflecsi* brand. Our research assesses the passenger experience of Demand Responsive Transport (DRT). We hope the lessons will be of value not only to TfW but also to other operators and authorities considering DRT as part of the public transport mix for the future.

DRT has existed for years, mainly in the form of 'Dial-a-Ride' services aimed primarily at elderly and disabled members of the community. More recently technology has allowed the development

of flexible services with online booking through apps. Computer algorithms calculate drivers' routes and schedules.

The challenge facing public transport is to address key barriers of cost, convenience and complexity. Widening the appeal of public transport services can encourage behaviour change and provide communities with more travel options. This research provides valuable insight into how *fflecsi* services can play a part in meeting this challenge, for the benefit of the people of Wales.

Councillor William Powell

Board member for Wales

Key findings – users and potential users

Attitudes towards public transport

The people we spoke to were all existing users of public transport or open to the idea of potentially using a flexible bus service. For those with access to a car, it is generally the 'obvious' and preferred means of making a journey unless driving and parking are an issue. Buses are the most obvious alternative for local journeys (where available) with taxis being used, despite the cost, where the bus or a lift is not an option. Trains and coaches are only really considered for longer-distance trips out of the immediate area.

All were in favour of reasonable public transport provision but often recognised the challenges in providing a service in their local area. Some car users saw a need for themselves as well as for others without a car or with specific mobility issues. As such, people welcome *fflecsi*, and similar services elsewhere. Some expressed concern that the service might be withdrawn if not used enough, especially where they understood that *fflecsi* was currently a pilot.

"My brother has to use it to go to job interviews, and so do I now I've finished college – it's the only option we've got."

Female, User, 18, Pembrokeshire

Once people understood the *fflecsi* offer, they generally saw it as innovative and a modern solution to local transport. Some of those who had been used to a scheduled, if limited, service before the introduction of *fflecsi* were disconcerted by the change. They preferred the simplicity and perceived reliability of the scheduled service. Others recognised that not only does *fflecsi* maintain a local bus service, its very flexibility provides a much enhanced offer.

"I think it's brilliant – so much better than before. It needs more advertising. I've got everybody using it – all my family and friends!"

Female, User, 41, Denbigh

Experiences of, and attitudes towards, *fflecsi* are remarkably consistent across the three Welsh areas we have covered to date (Denbigh, Pembrokeshire, Conwy Valley). Although perhaps not as remote as the Welsh locations, findings are generally similar for the two English DRT operations (Tees Valley and Sevenoaks). We may observe differences when we are able to complete the project and include findings from Newport.

Awareness and understanding

Where a flexible bus service has replaced a scheduled service, bus drivers appear to have played a key role in informing previous regular passengers and explaining how to use the flexible service. It should be noted that there had been relatively little publicity for the new services given that people were being advised to make only essential journeys.

Many potential users are aware of the flexible bus services in their area from seeing the buses driving around. That said, they may not know much about the service or how it operates. They may also have doubts as to whether they can use the service or whether it is simply for the elderly or disabled – potentially because of prior knowledge of Dial-a-Ride services provided for such passengers.

"Actually, the bus driver, he was dropping off leaflets and he dropped it off in our local pub and the landlord said it would be good for me, 'cause I was getting really fed up with the Bwcabus... I pretty much used it within a day or two [after that]."

Male, User, 61, Mobility issue, Pembrokeshire

"I'd seen fflecsi but I wasn't too sure if it was for the disabled or the elderly."

Mixed pair, Potential users, 26 and 45, Pembrokeshire

'Flexibility' is appealing, but people are often unsure just what this means. Sometimes they cannot believe that it can be 'that' flexible and fear that the proposition sounds too good to be true – 'a taxi service at a bus price'. In the more rural areas there can even be a feeling that it's not the sort of thing they would expect to get in their area.

"I tend to use fflecsi almost as a personal taxi service... to town and back and forth."

Male, User, 32, Denbigh

"This is too good to be true; this is Pembrokeshire, we don't get transport like this."

Mixed pair, Potential users, 39 and 41, Pembrokeshire

For certain journeys, using fflecsi can be simpler than trying to make the trip on several regular buses. People value the ability of fflecsi to connect to longer-distance bus routes to major centres or the coast. They also appreciate integration with trains, although such journeys account for only a small proportion of total journeys.

"Sometimes I go to Betws y Coed on the fflecsi, and then I go on the train to Llandudno. The fflecsi bus stops right by the station in Betws y Coed, so this works well." *

Male, User, 80, Conwy Valley

People can struggle to grasp how the app works and how the algorithm plans the journey. There is a belief that 'there must be a timetable', concerns about 'everybody wanting to travel at the same time', about how much time to allow to be sure of making an appointment or a connection, and about the bus 'doubling back' if somebody books a trip at the last minute when other passengers are already on board.

"The only thing that's happened is a couple of times they've turned around and gone back to exactly where they've picked me up whilst we've been on our journey and then it made my journey a lot longer... I was a bit annoyed to be honest."

Female, User, 52, Mobility issue, Tees Valley

"Basically, when I looked at the website, the main concern for me was the reliability – it would be ok for me at the weekend to go into Sevenoaks because the parking's rubbish, I've got time on my hands, but I would question the reliability if I wanted to get to a station for a certain train. I couldn't get a sense of how often they run? Is there any sort of timetable? Do they circle and wait for someone to book? Is there one in your area an hour or something?"

Male, Potential user, 35, Sevenoaks

For some, the benefits of flexibility come at the expense of simplicity and habit. Those who might have only had a bus at 10.04 on a Tuesday previously can see it as an unwelcome chore to have to book in advance. They may also have worries about the bus turning up, its punctuality, as well as what route and how long it will take, whereas the 10.04 offered certainty – albeit just once a week.

* Translated from the original Welsh

"First thoughts - Well I wasn't pleased about it, obviously it's new and everybody likes new things - [But] I thought it wasn't very good really. You've got to plan your journeys. I know you had to plan the normal bus, but you knew when it was coming then."

Female, User, 69, Denbigh

"I found the mechanics of it hard to work out... How on earth would you book using an app? I think I would find all the new routes hard to fathom - it didn't make a lot of sense to me."

Female, Potential user, 71, Denbigh

"The only thing with the fflecsi is that you have to book and it's a nuisance, and with the Llew Jones to Denbigh, it just turns up here every Friday at 10.15am, and that's it!" *

Female, User, 88, Conwy Valley

"They could put something on YouTube showing someone booking it on their app and the steps you have to go through. Video is much better for this sort of thing."

Male, Potential user, 65, Pembrokeshire

Using the app to book a ride

Attitudes to booking via an **app** are polarised. It holds few fears for seasoned smartphone users who see it as modern and convenient. The functionality of the app in terms of the interactive map, booking confirmations, alerts as the bus is approaching, and so on are welcomed and, indeed, expected in this day and age.

Some who have been forced to learn how to use the app on their phone (often with help from family, friends or even drivers) are pleasantly surprised at how well it works once they get used to it. Others, including non-phone owners, may prefer to book via the website or the call centre. The **call centre** is highly regarded and seen as an essential part of the offer by many – both for making bookings and also for sorting out any issues with the service or with a booking.

"The app is pretty easy to use, common sense, not hard, but I don't know how it works, is there a route? Is there more than one bus? Are there a few floating around? If 20 people book it at the same time how do they manage to stick to the timetable? Is there a timetable? I'd want to be somewhere by a certain time, so can they do that?"

Male, Potential user, 59, Denbigh

"I'd want to book over the phone because it's good to hear confirmation from someone else's voice. I always have that thing in mind that I might have got it wrong, or made a mistake. If someone tells you then it's their word, reassurance, and if it goes wrong it's their fault."

Male pair, Potential users, 21 and 22, Conwy Valley

* Translated from the original Welsh

Some passengers do have concerns about **mobile phone coverage** in their area – whether real or imagined. They fear not being able to make the initial booking, not receiving updates or alerts and struggling to book their return journey once at their destination. In one location, passengers had been experiencing problems in booking a return journey before making their outward journey; this issue has since been rectified.

In part because of this (although we heard the same suggestion in other areas too) passengers suggested there should be telephones at the town centre bus stops to enable them to make a return booking when ready. We understand TFW is setting up a facility so that medical and educational establishments, supermarkets and the like can access the system to make return bookings for customers.

"4G is non-existent in some areas around here - I'm pretty sure they're still using candles in some places."

Male pair, Potential users, 21 and 22, Conwy Valley

"My phone regularly runs out of battery, I have no connection. I have no data on it... Are there any solutions? Can't they have a phone at the bus stop?"

Female, Potential user, 41, Sevenoaks

While the option to set an '**arrive by**' time is not available in all areas, many potential passengers in areas where it is available are unaware of it. Also, some who have used the app struggled to get it to work and others are just unsure how it works and whether they can rely on it. Regular commuters seem to find this particularly worrying if making an onward connection and have been unwilling to risk the odd journey to try the service out.

We asked people to go on the **website** for their local flexible bus service and to provide feedback. Most found the websites helpful and that they give a good explanation of the service although 'how to' guides for booking and using the service were suggested.

"They could have comments from regular users, what they think and their experiences. I always look at the reviews."

Female, User, 18, Pembrokeshire

Using the service

The majority of users are **satisfied with the service** being provided, albeit some still hanker after a scheduled service. Generally, the flexibility is appreciated along with the proximity of pick-up points, although there appears to have been some issues in the early days with accusations that those programming the system do not understand the local geography and that nearer, safe pick-up points could be identified. In some instances drivers have reportedly chosen to over-ride the system based on their local knowledge.

During the pandemic passengers have not experienced any problems in getting a seat on the bus once a booking has been made. However, they do harbour concerns that as traffic picks up post-pandemic, getting a seat, or making a booking, could become an issue.

"Only thing is, if it gets busier, then does it get less flexible?"

Male pair, Potential users, 21 and 22, Conwy Valley

The **quality of the buses** is generally acceptable with smaller vehicles often being seen as more suitable for the local roads and also being perceived as 'friendlier'. Those who needed wheelchair access welcomed the fact that it is available, although the requirement for an initial assessment caused some concern. As we have found previously, **the attitude of the driver** is key to a satisfactory (or better) experience, especially where it is the same driver each day.

"The vehicles are really well kept, you see they're cleaned every day they're very clean and tidy... The drivers are dressed smartly as well, they have their uniforms on and they're very friendly."

Male, User, 30, Sevenoaks

"Women feeling safe getting on buses, people can be quite threatening, but if it's smaller and with seatbelts then people are going to feel safer."

Male pair, Potential users, 21 and 22, Conwy Valley

The prospective users we spoke to were all recruited on the basis that the flexible service had the potential to be of benefit to them for certain journeys. Avoiding the need to drive and the 'hassle' and cost of parking were often cited as an attraction, coupled with the ability to drink alcohol responsibly. Some prospects claimed to be waiting for the 'right opportunity' to try it out – this would probably be a non-essential leisure journey as the perceived risks of missing an appointment or an onward connection are too off-putting to those not familiar with the service. A number of potential users went so far as to suggest free travel vouchers or other incentives to get people to experience the service.

Attitudes to **service times and frequencies** varies by area and according to passengers' journey purpose. Some would like (or even need) an earlier service to get them to work on time – especially in areas where the service is believed to be available only once the bus and/or driver have done the 'school run'. Later services might allow people to engage in after-work or other evening social activities. Sunday services might benefit both shoppers and worshippers – and both might offer an opportunity for the 'waverers' to evaluate the service on a non-critical journey.

"From a selfish point of view, maybe an earlier start and a later finish so I can use it for work."

Male, User, 32, Denbigh

"The fact that it doesn't run on a Sunday. You've got people wanting to go to church and chapel, especially the older ones. It would be nice to have an option just for a few hours on a Sunday."

Male pair, Potential users, 21 and 22, Conwy Valley

"You can go down to the town and then when you want to come back but the driver has to have his lunch and their lunch is between 12 and half 12, I think, and there's a great demand for the buses then... It's horrendous trying to get a bus back then."

Female, User, 69, Denbigh

Inevitably there is frustration in areas where a service was available in a 'zone' only on certain days of the week. We also heard a few complaints that a desired destination was 'only just' outside the zone of operation but could not be served. Issues with some cross-zonal journeys in Pembrokeshire may be resolved now that the local *Bwcabus* service has joined the *fflecsi* family.



"Less useful is that the trips vary and they aren't going to the same places every day – might not work for work because of limited operating hours and destination drop offs."

Female, Potential user, 29, Pembrokeshire

"I wish it wasn't so rigid, the drivers are not allowed to go off piste, I wish they could. It's quite strict and I see why, it's just frustrating that the boundaries are so set in stone... They always say 'no sorry, it's out of zone'."

Male, User, 57, Tees Valley

While we did not set out to speak to any **tourists** as part of the research, there is a clear belief that flexible services can benefit them and, hence, the local economy – although this is coupled with a concern that at the height of the season there might not be enough seats for local residents. One person we spoke to in Sevenoaks did in fact express an interest in using *fflecsi* when next on holiday in Pembrokeshire – and as a rambler, in walking one way and using the bus to get back (or vice versa).

The **cost** of flexible journeys is felt to be acceptable. Compared with a taxi (potentially the only alternative for those without a car) it is very favourable. There is a degree of interest in combined tickets amongst those connecting with onward services, and for contactless payments to be accepted on the buses. Few users are particularly bothered about being given a paper ticket unless they intend to claim the fare on expenses.

User types

Our research has pointed to six key groups of users and potential users as detailed below:

Cluster	Workers and students	Retired	People with no access to car	Unemployed	Mobility impaired	Tourists
Who they are	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular travellers Late teens – working age Generally lower socio-economic groups except students (more mixed) and some higher socio-economic groups in Sevenoaks (London commuters). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mixed gender Mixed social socio-economic groups. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lower socio-economic groups Working age but may not be in work or working part-time and with childcare responsibilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any but particularly lower socio-economic groups. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any – range of ages and conditions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any.
Why they ride	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To get to work or university Students will also use for leisure purposes, commuters in this sample typically have other options at weekends. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For leisure purposes Short distance shopping trips and GP visits Visiting family/friends May have surrendered car so only option. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shopping trips Leisure Visits to family and friends. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leisure Travel to job centre and interviews Shopping trips. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Freedom/independence Commuting Attending appointments Shopping May not be able to drive themselves Can travel with carer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leisure purposes Don't know the area May not have brought their car Want to relax (no stress of driving) One way travel – walk out or back.



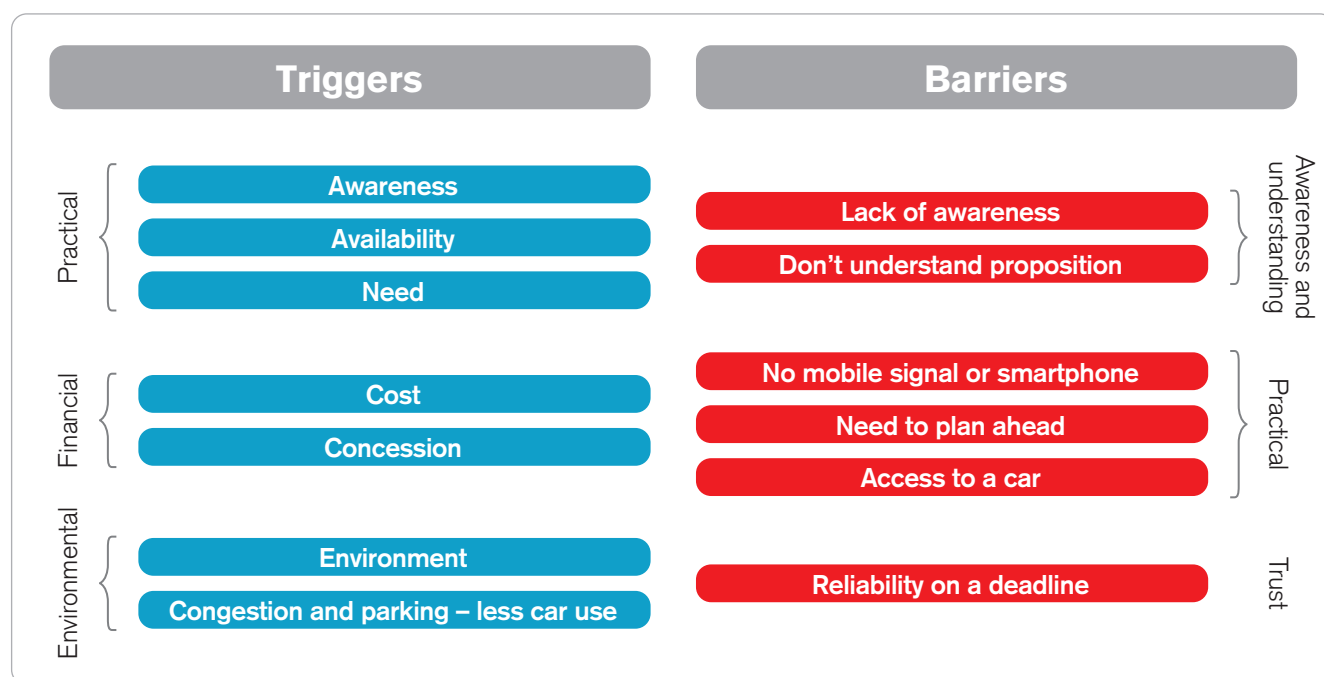
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Triggers and barriers

Across the localities we covered, we have noted a consistent set of triggers and barriers (as detailed below). There are some nuances which mean that what might encourage take-up varies a little between the groups:

Congestion and parking are more of a trigger for

workers/students and for leisure and tourists, while eligibility for concessionary travel is naturally most relevant for the retired and mobility impaired. In terms of barriers, the one noticeable difference across the groups is that reliability is of greatest importance to workers/students and the mobility impaired.



Encouraging greater uptake of flexible bus services

Our research amongst existing and potential users of flexible bus services suggests a number of steps to be taken to encourage greater use of flexible bus services:

- once Covid restrictions permit, promote the services more widely (including journey options and who can use them)
- provide better explanations as to how the services and the booking process work
- align service hours with users' needs, in particular for travel to and from work and education
- provide reassurance regarding journey reliability (potentially by publishing performance statistics) and better information on how to make a booking that ensures arrival by a specified time
- review websites to ensure they answer potential users' questions; consider 'how to' guides (possibly videos) for booking and using the service as well as having an interactive map of the area served
- engage with local support groups to promote the service and potentially to facilitate wheelchair assessments

- start appropriate promotion via tourist information centres, local attractions and at beauty spots, including leaflets and posters with details of how to book a ride
- address concerns around the reliability of mobile coverage and work with local medical, educational, leisure and retail establishments to facilitate the booking of return journeys
- promote the green credentials of public transport to car owners along with its benefit in avoiding the 'hassle' and cost of parking
- consider vouchers for a free journey and other incentives to encourage trial as well as encouraging feedback and user reviews.

These findings will be reviewed once we have completed the research programme, including findings from the recently launched Newport *fflecsi*. It is likely that a service in a metropolitan area such as Newport may produce somewhat different findings to the more rural operations in our research to date.

Key findings – operators and local authorities

We carried out interviews with operators and/or local authorities in the same five areas as the user and prospective user interviews (Denbigh, Pembrokeshire, Conwy Valley, Tees Valley and Sevenoaks). We also did this in two areas that had opted not to participate in the *fflecsi* pilot, namely Gwynedd and Swansea.

Attitudes towards Demand Responsive Transport

Operators and local authorities have a keen interest in Demand Responsive Transport and in seeing how the *fflecsi* pilot works in practice. This interest was already apparent prior to the Coronavirus pandemic as they faced falling passenger numbers and issues over the viability of scheduled services. However, few had made any real progress in evaluating it. Interest grew as the pandemic took hold and already-low passenger numbers dropped further due to 'stay-at-home' advice from governments.

Transport for Wales's pilot scheme has enabled a number of Welsh service providers to establish a *fflecsi* operation. This has allowed them to maintain a bus service during the pandemic and associated lockdowns and, potentially, to reduce the cost of subsidising existing scheduled services. DRT has also been seen as a way of expanding access to public transport, particularly in rural areas, and of contributing to environmental ambitions by replacing some journeys that would otherwise be made by private car.

Operators and local authorities are generally supportive of TfW's work to establish the *fflecsi* concept and to facilitate 'back office' support in terms of providing access to the *ViaVan* software and the centralised call centre. The Welsh providers generally say that they would not have been able to contemplate a flexible bus operation without TfW's assistance.

"At the moment TfW are funding the app and the call centre and we feel that's best done nationally. If ever we were forced to fund those elements, then my fear is all the benefits we're gaining would be lost."

Local authority, Wales

That is not to say that they do not have some criticisms of the way the services have been introduced. While acknowledging that many operations were introduced 'in a hurry' in response to the pandemic's impact, some feel this was too rushed and that they could have done it better had they had more time. In particular, establishing the location of suitable pick-up points has sometimes been problematic, confounded by poor knowledge of local geography by those doing the work. It was also felt that TfW had been slow to approve promotional material and that this had not helped to raise awareness of the new services in the early days.

"I think we get good and adequate support from TfW, they're enthusiastic, they want them to succeed, we and the operators want to succeed. There is a lot of money for marketing when we can, and we'd like to use that if able to do so because the service is going to stand more chance of success were it to be better marketed. I'd like there to be more surety of the future for *fflecsi*."

Local authority, Wales

"I suppose it's fair to say that we did this in something of a rush. Nonetheless, it was made relatively easy for us by TfW. The only real teething problems were right at the beginning, and when we changed from one contractor to another – that was resolved within 24 hours."

Local authority, Wales

Service providers say that they have learnt some valuable lessons and will be better prepared to set up similar schemes elsewhere in future if needed.

"TFW took it on themselves to set up all the virtual stops. I'd assumed, because we'd been asked for a list, that that had all been done, and it hadn't been. TFW were thinking 'we can take that off their shoulders' but they missed out on the local knowledge. The way that the stops are named, doesn't help users. It'll say 'post office' but not the name of the village!"

Operator, Wales

Without exception service providers agree that DRT cannot be seen as a 'cheap option' and will not necessarily lead to cost savings. The resources needed to promote and support a flexible bus service are higher than for scheduled services. Nevertheless, they feel that DRT was an appropriate reaction to the pandemic as it ensured a bus service could be maintained. At the same time it delivered additional public transport opportunities to communities and contributed to environmental ambitions.

"Keeping a standard fixed route bus service is difficult because you'd have two passengers a day but removing them is a challenge because you've got pressures from the councillors, the community, because they don't want to lose them. It provides a much better service in terms of what we had before, in terms of accessibility. My own personal view is that, we've talked about getting people to give up their car, but I don't think it will do that. It's part of the solution but not the complete solution."

Local authority, Wales

Some service providers fear they have lost some former passengers (although this may be the result of the pandemic as much as the switch to *fflecsi*) but at the same time they claim they are seeing new users attracted by a flexible service. All are eagerly awaiting an upturn in public transport use as pandemic restrictions and concerns reduce.

"I think we've noticed over the first five to six months that the people using are not the people who used the bus in the past. They have been using it to go to work. Those who used the old services are the people who have been shielding. It's going to be interesting to see if they come back. It sounds like they will, but for them it's quite a big change and will they be able to do all the things - calling up, logging on? Where it's located, one of the key things is going to be how it links in with tourists, because in theory it should be quite good for them. I'm looking forward to that, and slightly apprehensive!"

Local authority, Wales

Nevertheless, some harbour a worry that if *fflecsi* is successful in attracting people back to public transport and, in particular, in growing the market, then the number of vehicles and drivers required to meet the demand for *fflecsi* could become uneconomic and they would need to look at reintroducing scheduled services to cope with this demand. That said, there is a belief that DRT should be a part of the future public transport mix.

Challenges in setting up a DRT operation

The challenges faced by operators and authorities fall into four broad categories:

- passenger-facing
 - integration with other services
 - educating and managing passengers
- operational
 - selection and management of partners
 - implementing the technology.

A straightforward DRT operation is comparatively simple, but integrating with existing, scheduled services (to provide an integrated, or IRT, service) can be challenging and places more demands on the software powering the system. There can also be concerns initially from other operators that the DRT service risks taking away passengers from their services rather than feeding into them.

Although it may have been assumed that the routes of previous scheduled services catered to passengers' needs, this may not always be the case and it is important to understand where passengers want to travel from and to, and at what times. Delivering people to a bus station may have been the norm, but their actual destination, which a flexible service can aim to cater for, might be a health centre, edge-of-town supermarket, job centre, railway station or somewhere else.

Then, once the service has been designed and is ready for launch, passengers have to be notified of the change and educated in using the new service including how to book a ride. Service providers acknowledge the key role

of drivers in delivering these messages. This applies on existing services that are about to be replaced, on the new flexible service in its early days of operation, and on an ongoing basis if the market is to be grown by encouraging new users including tourists.

Managing partners can present issues, both in terms of authorities selecting and appointing a bus operator and then in terms of the 'back office' support. TfW introducing providers to *ViaVan* and establishing the call centre has simplified the latter process. However, the technology has often resulted in a steep learning curve – understanding what it can and can't do and how to get the best out of it. There is also a recognition that the app is not a 'silver bullet' and that some users will not be able, or will simply prefer not, to use it.

Local authorities and operators describe three key success criteria for a DRT operation:

- **knowing the area** – keeping it tightly defined and knowing when and between which locations people want to travel
- **keeping the offer simple** – standardise days and times of operation as far as practical, keep any zonal system simple and ensure it makes sense to the passenger, publicise the service and pay attention to explanations as to how it operates and how to book a ride
- **working together as a partnership** – Transport for Wales, local authorities and operators need to recognise the importance of their respective roles, to build and maintain good working relationships and to use drivers' local knowledge to make the operation run smoothly.



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Initial conclusions

These conclusions are based primarily on the three, predominantly rural, Welsh areas (Denbigh, Pembrokeshire and Conwy Valley), supplemented by two English operations (Tees Valley and Sevenoaks). We will revisit them on completion of the project when the findings from Newport may lead us to make some amendments (in part because that is a more metropolitan location).

- Once the flexible concept is understood, it is seen as an attractive option both by previous bus users and by some who might be open to using it in place of a car.
- Promotion and education are essential if people (both existing bus users and potential converts) are to fully appreciate the concept, the ride booking system and the fact that it is 'for everybody' (not just the elderly or disabled).
- Demand Responsive Transport is well-suited to serve the rural communities covered in the *fflecsi* pilot where the economics of scheduled bus services are marginal at best.
- The profile of passengers and their journeys is remarkably similar across the three Welsh operations – as are their attitudes towards *fflecsi*.
- Shopping, attending appointments (medical, job interviews and so on) and leisure trips are most common. Current operating times in certain areas may not accommodate conventional commuting hours.
- While the idea of a service that integrates with existing scheduled bus and train services is appealing to some, there are widespread concerns about the reliability of any connections and whether the service can be trusted to deliver against this particular promise.
- For many, using an app to book a ride is appealing and marks the service out as innovative and modern. Many of those who were initially uncomfortable at using the technology have adapted to it, while some prefer to use the call centre. This is a key part of the offer and a reassurance if people experience any difficulties with the system.
- The vehicles used are generally well-liked (including by the mobility-impaired), but it is the drivers who are the face of the service. They are key to the passenger experience (including assisting with the booking process).
- The successful introduction of a DRT service is dependent on a good working relationship between the partners (operators and local authorities). Transport for Wales's role in enabling access to the *ViaVan* software and back office, as well as the call centre, has been critical in establishing the *fflecsi* operation.
- However, if DRT schemes are successful in boosting passenger numbers post-pandemic the economic argument may switch in favour of scheduled services (particularly where commuting is significant).
- The research points towards a valuable role for DRT as a part of the overall transport mix.

Methodology

This research is jointly funded by Transport for Wales (TfW) and Transport Focus Wales. We commissioned Define Insight & Strategy to carry out the research.

Because of the Covid pandemic, interviewing has been conducted remotely, primarily via video link. This meant the interviewer was able to show stimulus materials such as shots of the various websites. We used telephone interviews for the few people without access to the internet.

Users of the *fflecsi*³ service in Denbigh, the Conway Valley and Pembrokeshire, and DRT services in the Tees Valley⁴ and Sevenoaks⁵ were sent an email inviting them to participate in the research, and asked a limited number of profiling questions. We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the TfW call centre as well as operators across the areas in helping to identify and obtain the agreement of passengers, booking both by telephone and via the app, to co-operate in the research.

The fieldwork team made appointments with willing participants (and sought referrals to other users/potential users known to these individuals). They also sought out other users and potential users in the various areas. Interviewing started in March 2021 but with few people travelling at that time we initially made slow progress.

As Covid restrictions were relaxed, Define increased its efforts during June and July. In total we have completed 48 user/potential user interviews (five interviews were conducted as friendship pairs). The interviews took, on average, 40 minutes.

Define has also completed 10 in-depth interviews (by video link) with local authority and operator stakeholders in the same areas, as well as in Gwynedd and Swansea. These extra two were to get the view of stakeholders who had chosen not to participate in the TfW pilot.

The research programme is currently paused until the recently-launched *fflecsi* operation in Newport⁶ has established itself and passengers have had time to experience the service. Further interviewing is scheduled for early 2022 and a full report will be published on completion of the complete programme.

Transport Focus previously looked at Demand Responsive Transport in 2016 in terms of users' views of pre-booked community buses and shared taxis in collaboration with the local authorities in Suffolk, Worcestershire and Hampshire⁷.

³ Please see the *fflecsi* website (<https://www.fflecsi.wales/>) for details of these services.

⁴ See: <https://www.stagecoachbus.com/promos-and-offers/north-east/tees-flex#>.

⁵ See: <http://www.go2now.co.uk/#how-to-book-your-journey>.

⁶ See: <https://www.fflecsi.wales/locations/newport/>.

⁷ That report is available at: <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/demand-responsive-transport-users-views-pre-booked-community-buses-shared-taxis/>.

Mae'r ddogfen hon hefyd ar
gael yn Gymraeg.

This document is also
available in Welsh.

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