



**Imtac position paper on demand responsive  
transport services (DRT)**

**(June 2023)**

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## **Making our information accessible**

As an organisation of and for Deaf people, disabled people and older people Imtac recognises that the way information is provided can be a barrier to accessing services and participation in public life. We are committed to providing information about our work in formats that best suit the needs of individuals.

All our documents are available in hard copy in 14pt type size as standard. We also provide word and pdf versions of our documents on our website – [www.imtac.org.uk](http://www.imtac.org.uk). In addition, we will provide information in a range of other formats. These formats include:

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## **About Imtac**

The Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (Imtac) is a committee of disabled people and older people as well as others including carers and key transport professionals. Its role is to advise Government and others in Northern Ireland on issues that affect the mobility of Deaf people, disabled people and older people.

The aim of Imtac is to ensure that Deaf people, disabled people and older people have the same opportunities as everyone else to travel when and where they want.

Imtac receives support from the Department for Infrastructure (herein after referred to as the Department).

## **What is demand responsive transport (DRT)**

Demand responsive transport is the generic name for a range of flexible services that provide shared transport to passengers who request journeys between specific pick up and drop off points. DRT services run without a set timetable and tend to use smaller vehicles than traditional fixed route public transport.

## **Background**

In 2012 Imtac published its paper “Flexible Future – Lessons from the development of demand responsive transport services”<sup>1</sup>. The paper explored the development of DRT services in both Northern Ireland and Great Britain, examining research and evaluation of the services. The report highlighted the lack of experimentation in Northern Ireland around DRT services compared to elsewhere. This included the lack of experimentation with different types of DRT services including services which use advances in technology to allow routes to be adjusted in real time with subsequent minimum notice requirements for travel. The report recommended that DRT should play a greater future role in the delivery of transport services in Northern Ireland and that a cross sectoral forum should be established to take this forward.

More than a decade later the Committee has decided to review developments around DRT both in Northern Ireland and elsewhere and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.imtac.org.uk/flexible-future-lessons-development-demand-responsive-transport-services>

to restate its position on the future role of DRT in the delivery of transport services in Northern Ireland.

## **Developments in Northern Ireland**

Following the publication of Flexible Future the then Department for Regional Development initiated a pilot in the Dungannon. Bringing together a range of agencies including the Department of Health, the Department of Education and Translink the pilot sought to make better use of existing transport resources to deliver flexible services. The pilot ended without any formal evaluation of what worked and what didn't.

During this period the Department continued to support two existing DRT services – rural Dial-a-Lift operated by Rural Community Transport Partnerships and the urban Door2Door service which became DATS in 2014, operated by Disability Action with support from Bridge Accessible Transport and the Rural Community Transport Partnership. Both services are traditional type DRT services with restrictions on eligibility, availability and requiring advance booking of up to seven days before travel.

Policy and services remained unchanged until the Department published “Planning for the future of transport – Time for change<sup>2</sup>” in 2021. Time for Change outlines how the Department's priorities for the future of transport here can be supported by the improved planning, management, and development of the transport networks over 10 to 15 years. It is shaped by the outcomes of the Programme for Government and the significant challenges created by climate change.

Time for Change includes two references to DRT. The section “How we will get there” includes the following in relation to innovative services:

**“Dynamic demand responsive transport:** flexible forms of shared public transport that respond to passenger demands for pick-up and drop-off using digital and mobile telecommunications “

In section 6, Examples of Transport Measures, DRT is referred to in relation transport in rural areas:

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/planning-future-transport-time-change>

“Demand responsive public transport using accessible vehicles and innovative inclusive methods of communication to provide more cost effective and useable services for all.”

## **Developments elsewhere**

Although examples of DRT highlighted in Flexible Future struggled to survive during the years of austerity and the general reductions in funding for bus services across Great Britain, experimentation in DRT has had a renaissance there in recent years with pilots running in urban and rural areas.

In England “Bus Back Better: national bus strategy for England<sup>3</sup>” recognises the role that demand responsive transport can play where traditional fixed route services are not viable. The Rural Mobility Fund<sup>4</sup> was established to support trials of DRT services with 20 pilots funded to date.

The Welsh Government has invested in piloting rural DRT services under the fflecsi<sup>5</sup> branding. Llwybr Newydd: The Wales Transport Strategy<sup>6</sup> commits to monitoring the development of fflecsi with a view to extending services. Transport Focus has carried out some early evaluation of the service<sup>7</sup>, outlining some of the learnings so far.

In Ireland Local Link services have been operating for many years including some demand responsive services. Under its Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan, the National Transport Authority is proposing “New and improved demand responsive services (usually using smaller buses) working variable routes and times depending on who books to use them, linking less populous areas into the network<sup>8</sup>”.

## **Imtac Policy Position on Demand Responsive Transport**

In 2022 Imtac published its “A New Approach to travel, our Streets and places<sup>9</sup>”. New Approach sets out the changes the Committee see as

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[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/980227/DfT-Bus-Back-Better-national-bus-strategy-for-England.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/980227/DfT-Bus-Back-Better-national-bus-strategy-for-England.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rural-mobility-fund>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.fflecsi.wales>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.wales/llwybr-newydd-wales-transport-strategy-2021>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/fflecsi-the-experience-of-demand-responsive-transport-in-wales/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nationaltransport.ie/connecting-ireland/what-is-connecting-ireland/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.imtac.org.uk/new-approach-travel-our-streets-and-our-places>

essential to meeting the challenges of Climate Change, the cost of living crisis and a fairer post pandemic world. One of the four key principles of New Approach is to think differently about ensuring that end to end journeys are straightforward and accessible. The Committee views greater use of different types of demand responsive transport as an important way of delivering the change required.

There have been significant improvements to the accessibility of public transport in the last decade. Investment means that bus and rail services are an option for many more Deaf people, disabled people and older people than in the past. However, barriers to travel still exist including access to some rail stations and the inaccessibility of some inter urban services. For many, particularly for people in rural areas, getting to bus and rail services involve prohibitive distances or inaccessible infrastructure. DRT has the potential to make journeys by public transport more accessible to many more Deaf people, disabled people and older people either through providing connecting services to the existing network or by replacing existing fixed route services with flexible, demand led alternatives. There is also potential for these DRT services to replace journeys currently undertaken by cars, key to success in meeting climate change objectives.

The current demand responsive services in Northern Ireland provide a vital service for some Deaf people, disabled people and older people. But for many others the services are restrictive and lack the availability, flexibility, and accessibility they require for undertaking day to day activities such as access to education, training and employment. Given the wider challenges facing our society, Imtac believes it is essential that Government here now looks at other types of flexible services, more focused on the end user, including dynamic DRT where travel is possible at short notice.

Imtac has regularly highlighted that due to the current design standards for public transport, some disabled people cannot use these services. For this reason, the Committee recognises there will be a continued need for door to door type services in both rural and urban parts of Northern Ireland. However, with a greater focus on other forms of flexible services, demand for door to door type journeys can be greatly reduced. Greater experimentation in the types of DRT services could, potentially, also see reduced demand for health and education transport services. Reducing the requirement for bespoke transport solutions will ultimately deliver savings to Government.

The Committee recognises that DRT services are not a panacea for current issues with our transport system. There are many examples from elsewhere of services have been trialled and failed. However, if Government is to meet the challenges outlined in Time for Change it is essential that new ways of delivering services are explored. DRT has the potential to deliver on several areas including:

- Delivering connectivity for people living in rural areas
- Improving uptake of existing public transport services
- Reducing car usage and delivering modal shift
- Improving access to key services, employment, education and training opportunities
- Reducing social exclusion

Although there has been limited experimentation with DRT in Northern Ireland compared to other parts of Great Britain and Ireland, this does mean there is a wealth of experience from elsewhere that we can learn from.

## **Conclusion**

It is essential that new and innovative approaches to travel are considered when developing proposed new transport plans for Northern Ireland. Imtac views greater experimentation with flexible DRT services including dynamic DRT as a key element of delivering the change required and meeting challenges presented by Climate Change. The Committee recommends that an enhanced and extended role for DRT must be a key consideration for the Department in the development and delivery of any future transport plans. The Committee also recommends that Imtac should be a key partner in the development and delivery of any future DRT service to ensure that we maximise the opportunities to make services accessible to everyone.