



**Flexible future – lessons from the development
of demand responsive transport services**

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Summary of our findings

This paper looks at lessons to learned for Northern Ireland in the provision of demand responsive transport (DRT) services in England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland. Through this work we have identified the following:

- There has been much greater experimentation with different types of DRT services in other parts of these islands compared with Northern Ireland
- Whilst not always successful these DRT services have provided a wealth of evidence about what works and what does not
- DRT services have proved successful in reducing social exclusion particularly in rural areas
- DRT services have been more cost effective than many of the pre-existing transport services in areas where they have been introduced
- DRT have helped increase the numbers of people using mainstream public transport
- Based on experiences elsewhere there are questions whether existing DRT services in Northern Ireland are effective or represent value for money
- The RDS and RTS has identified current travel patterns in Northern Ireland as unsustainable
- Given the dispersed and rural nature of our society it is questionable whether conventional public transport services on their own can deliver changes in travel patterns and meet need
- Given plans for savings it is likely that public transport, health transport, education transport and services such as door2door will face reductions over the next five years

- There is an overwhelming argument to look at how best we use all resources to ensure people have an opportunity to travel in future
- Imtac believes that greater use of different types demand responsive transport service should be used in Northern Ireland but recognises the many barriers that must be overcome to enable this to happen
- As a first step the Committee is recommending a cross-sectoral DRT Forum be formed to look at options for developing DRT services in Northern Ireland

About Imtac

Imtac is a committee of disabled people and older people as well as others including key transport professionals. Our role is to advise Government and others in Northern Ireland on issues that affect the mobility of older people and disabled people.

Our aim is to ensure that older people and disabled people have the same opportunities as everyone else to travel when and where they want.

Imtac receives support from the Department for Regional Development.

Background to this paper

Evidence shows that disabled people and older people find undertaking basic day to activities problematic because of difficulties accessing suitable transport¹. The reasons for this are complex but one of the key factors has been transport and land use policies over many decades that promote car use. Research² has shown the links between these policies and social exclusion amongst groups in society who have poor or no access to a car including many disabled people and older people.

Over the past decade there has been an increased understanding of this problem through policy developments in Northern Ireland. Developing effective solutions is complex as different people face different barriers to travel and barriers can be different depending on where people live. It is likely that no one solution will address the barriers to travel faced by disabled people, older people and others and that solutions will require a mix of different services. One such solution that Imtac has advocated is the increased use of flexible or demand responsive transport services.

The purpose of this paper is to look at evidence around experiences of operating demand responsive transport in other parts of these islands. To do this we have examined research and

¹ See Accessible Transport Strategy for Northern Ireland (DRD 2005)

² The best example of this is Making the Connections: Final Report on Transport and Social Exclusion (Social Exclusion Unit 2003)

evaluation³ of these services. We have attempted to identify good practice examples of the services and lessons learned about developing the services. We have looked at developments in Northern Ireland and attempted to assess how developments in Great Britain and Ireland could inform future policy and service development here.

What is Demand Responsive Transport (DRT)?

As conventional public transport operates best along corridors where there is high demand for this type of services there are numerous examples of where this type of service does not meet the transport needs of people whether it is because the person lives too far from the transport or because the service or activity the person wished to access is not served well by the public transport. Studies such as Intermode⁴ have highlighted how providing conventional public transport solutions have become more difficult as reliance on the car has increased and demand for services has dropped. Increasingly in Great Britain and elsewhere transport designed around the needs of the individual is often seen as the answer, commonly known as demand responsive transport.

Demand responsive transport has been operating in one form or another for decades in Northern Ireland and elsewhere. Specific transport services provided by both health and education are a form of DRT. This type of DRT includes for example non-emergency transport to and from hospital and transport to and from day-care. Specialised services for disabled people and older people such door2door are another. Services such as taxis or the Belfast taxi bus are commercial examples of demand responsive transport services.

Over the last two decades advances in technology, particularly around booking arrangements, have opened the way for much greater use of DRT services and experimentation with different types of services. Around the world many different types of

³ See Appendix 1

⁴ Intermode: Innovations in Demand Responsive Transport (Dr Enoch Et AL) prepared for the Department for Transport & Great Manchester Passenger Transport Executive (2004)

services have trialled with different methods of operating and with different overall aims. For example the type of service can vary greatly in flexibility – some services provide area wide flexibility such as our door-to-door services others rely on a route with varying degrees of flexibility. Some services are designed to link people to other public transport or to employers others have a focus on reducing social exclusion. Some DRT services try to achieve a number of different objectives with one service.

Developments in Great Britain and Ireland

Background

Over the past decade there has been substantial experimentation with DRT services in Great Britain and Ireland. This is due largely to specific Government funding programmes⁵ that have encouraged local authorities to innovate and use new technologies. As previously indicated the purpose and design of services has varied greatly. Many services proved to be short lived, ineffective and unsustainable, but proved useful in identifying the problems in developing this type of service. Other services have been more successful and have become a key part of local authorities approach to meeting the transport needs of their communities. We have identified a number of good examples which we have listed below. The examples we have identified all have a focus on reducing social exclusion although some of the services have other purposes such as encouraging modal shift by providing links for commuters.

Case studies

Case study one – Lincolnshire Interconnect
(<http://www.lincsinterconnect.com/>)

Lincolnshire County Council provides a range of flexible rural bus services under the Interconnect branding. Interconnect is a network of rural bus services linking people to key local services and interchange points where opportunities exist to travel further. These services are supplemented by demand responsive CallConnect services, which is a bookable bus service operating in

⁵ This includes the Rural and Urban Bus Challenges in GB and the Rural Transport Initiative in Ireland

defined areas that provides transport into and around the local town or links with Interconnect services. This service can be booked up to 1 hour before travel. Research indicates that Interconnect has been successful in reducing social exclusion in Lincolnshire by connecting isolated communities to key services and facilities and increasing access to other public transport services.

Case study two – Hampshire Cango services

(<http://www3.hants.gov.uk/passengertransport/communitytransport/cango.htm>)

Cango is part of a number of flexible transport services operated by Hampshire County Council. It is a flexibly routed bus service that operates to set timetables and is mainly booked in advance (allowing for bookings on the day). Cango serves rural communities around some key Hampshire towns. The service picks people up from pre-arranged meeting points and stops at key locations in the town including supermarkets, hospitals and bus and rail stations. The service has distinct markets at different times of days, commuters and school contracts in the early morning and evenings and people using the service for social reasons at other times. Research has shown that Cango has reduced demand on other expensive transport services such as health and door2door and has integrated public and home to school transport. Overall the service has been a more effective use of council resources than providing separate conventional bus services, education and health transport and specialised door-to-door services for disabled people.

Case Study three – Clare Accessible Transport

(<http://www.catconnects.ie/>)

Clare Accessible Transport provides a range of timetabled flexible route bus services from rural areas into urban areas of Clare in Ireland. Services are pre-booked. CAT is a community transport operator and has been able to supplement services supported under the Rural Transport Programme with other funding streams. CAT has also been able to work with statutory agencies integrating delivering a number of health contracts such as transport to and from day centres as part of the service. Services are also promoted to and used by tourists visiting the area.

Case study four – Local Link services in Greater Manchester
([http://www.tfgm.com/buses/local link.cfm](http://www.tfgm.com/buses/local_link.cfm))

Although many of the services we looked at are rural services, accessing transport can be a major problem in urban areas where bus and train service work best along corridors where demand is highest. In Manchester Transport for Greater Manchester has supported demand responsive transport services called Local Link in areas where it has proved difficult to provide conventional bus services. Local Link is a pre-booked service that can provide door-to-door transport within a defined area. Open to everyone it links people to key facilities locally as well as main public transport corridors for onward travel.

Lessons from the development of DRT services

The development of DRT services has been accompanied by significant research into their effectiveness. Imtac has studied the range of work undertaken into DRT particularly the influential Intermode study. From the work undertaken around innovation in GB and Ireland we have identified the following issues as key in developing successful services:

(1) A change in culture

Evidence suggests that developing DRT services requires a radical change in the cultures of many of the organisations involved. It requires statutory agencies to think holistically about transport requirements of communities, work in partnership with others and share information and resources. It requires transport operators to run an unfamiliar type of service. Often services have not been effective when one or more of key organisations are resistant to this change in culture.

(2) Partnership Working

Evidence shows that DRT services have worked best where the range of agencies involved work together. These agencies include statutory agencies involved in transport including health and education, transport providers and users and potential users. The examples we have use illustrate good partnership working between a range of stakeholders.

(3) Understanding local need

Evidence shows that services work best where there is a clear understanding of local need – where, why and when people want to travel. Research suggests services operate best where there is an existing culture of people using public transport services. Research also suggests that services have been less successful in areas where planners have introduced a model they believe will work rather than a model based on evidence of need.

(4) Having a clear market

Evidence suggests that Services work best where there is a clear purpose and a clear market. For instance a service may have a social inclusion focus promoting access to services. Other services promote modal shift or focus on access to employment opportunities. The research suggests that services that try to do everything tend to satisfy none of the potential users and fail quickly.

(5) Government/local authorities has to instigate change

All evidence suggests that successful schemes exist where Government or the local authority initiate the services and provide significant support to operators. Research clearly shows that transport operators are conservative by nature and will not provide the innovative type of services without guarantees from Government.

(6) Reducing Legal/Regulatory barriers

Research shows that often services are limited by legal and regulatory barriers. In GB there has been variation in the interpretation of licensing regulations, limiting the development of flexible services in different areas.

(7) Promotion and branding of services

Research has shown that often transport providers are poor at marketing public transport services. As innovative and unfamiliar services evidence suggests it is particularly important that DRT services have a strong branding and are marketed well.

Successful examples of DRT services have a strong branding and easy to use information about the services.

(8) Services require financial support

Evidence suggests that few if any examples of DRT services are commercially viable particularly if the aim of the service is to reduce social exclusion. However research suggests that successful services in GB do operate under what is viewed as an acceptable level of subsidy (broadly similar to subsidies given to subsidised conventional bus services). Many local authorities that operate successful DRT services balance the subsidy required to operate the service against the substantial additional cost of providing an alternative services such as door-to-door.

(9) Political support

DRT services require time to establish and to build up patronage. Research shows that successful services have received long term and sustained political support allowing what are innovative services a chance to develop.

Implications for Northern Ireland

Background

To date Northern Ireland has not seen the same experimentation with different types of demand responsive transport services. This is despite the development of a report into rural transport need as part of the development of the Regional Transportation Strategy⁶. This report recommended the greater use of differing types of flexible transport services and the RTS indicated setting aside around £30 million for piloting schemes.

Two services were piloted by Translink in Down and Fermanagh. These offered varying elements of flexibility including an area wide door2door service in Fermanagh and a flexibly routed bus service between Newcastle and Belfast. The services ended a number of

⁶ Issues of Rural Transport Need – Final Report for the Department for Regional Development by TAS Partnership

years ago with low demand cited as the reason. No formal evaluation of the services is available.

The Easibus Scheme developed in urban areas in the 1990's did have a demand responsive element to the design including a hail and ride or "hopper" component to the service. However over time many of the more innovative and flexible elements of the service were lost and the extensive initial marketing stopped. Recently services stopped operating in two locations citing low demand and the availability of other services including door2door.

The primary focus of more recent transport policy has been to develop two specialised area wide demand responsive transport schemes. The first is Door2door transport for disabled people and older people living in urban areas. The second is rural Dial-a-lift scheme available to members of Rural Community Transport Partnerships. Both schemes offer area wide door-to-door transport anywhere within the specific operating area. These schemes differ from some of the services we have looked at. For example services here generally try to meet demand over a greater area, can be restrictive in terms of who can use them and are first come first serve taking bookings in some cases weeks in advance.

Area wide DRT such as door2door has operated elsewhere since the 1970's and 1980's. Some of the research we have looked at questions how effective such services are in comparison to other forms of DRT. Studies such as Intermode question the cost of area wide services compared to other forms of DRT. Through informal discussions with operators of rural and urban DRT services in Northern Ireland we believe that a subsidy per trip of between £10 and £20 is not unusual. The schemes we have looked at in Great Britain have achieved a cost of trip level of between £5 and £10, some schemes have operated with a subsidy per trip of under £5. Other studies such as the Review of Demand Responsive Services in Scotland⁷ question how effective this type of area wide service is. Evidence suggests these services quickly

⁷ Review of Demand Responsive Transport in Scotland – produced for the Scottish Executive by Derek Halden Consultancy, TAS partnership and the University of Aberdeen (2006)

settle into established patterns of use and are less effective than more targeted local services.

Elsewhere Government in Northern Ireland continues to invest heavily in some of the most expensive forms of demand responsive transport in relation to health and education. Statistics⁸ indicate that over £70 million per year is spent by the education authorities on transport (this includes £7.8 spent transporting individuals in taxis). A further £30 million per year is spent by the health authorities on transport. A substantial proportion of this money is spent on dedicated transport for individuals to and from school, hospitals and other social care facilities. To our knowledge little or no work has been done to ascertain whether the need for these journeys could be met more effectively and efficiently.

One of the success stories of the past decade has been the investment in public transport services. Large capital investment has modernised our bus and rail services and accessibility standards mean that more and more disabled people and older people could use public transport. Significant subsidy allows Translink to maintain a substantial public transport network – just over £60 million per year from DRD and additional resources from Department of Education, which helps maintain many rural service levels. Without this subsidy the network would be reduced substantially. Evidence⁹ shows that despite investment patronage of bus services outside of Belfast is not going up leaving services vulnerable to spending reductions.

The drivers for change

There are a number of factors that should be influencing change in Northern Ireland and encouraging policy makers to look at a greater use of demand responsive transport services in future.

One of the key drivers for change is social factors influencing transport policy. The recent consultation on the review of the

⁸ Figures from 2008/9 taken from “Achieving Efficiencies in Public Transport” NI Assembly Research & Library services 2011

⁹ For an excellent summary of the impact of investment in public transport see “Transport Governance and the management of Car Dependency in Belfast” NI Assembly Research & Library Services 2011

Regional Development Strategy has highlighted a number of issues that will prove challenging in the future. Firstly our population is becoming more dispersed with many more people using the car to travel longer and further than ever before. This has clear implications for how we provide services now and in the future. It also makes providing cost effective and reliable public transport to meet increasingly dispersed demand much more difficult. The second issue that should be influencing policy makers is the projections for an ageing population¹⁰. Statistics show that car ownership decreases markedly with age. Given the projections for the increasing numbers of people living into their 80's, 90's and beyond this is likely to put unsustainable pressure on our existing services, increase demand for all transport services and will potentially lead to greater inequality and social exclusion.

The review of the Regional Transportation Strategy has already identified that our current travel patterns are unsustainable and that focus in future must make using public transport easier. Given the dispersed and rural nature of our population it is difficult to see how conventional bus services alone can provide a realistic and sustainable alternative to the car. From our research local DRT services have made travel easier in rural areas and proved effective in linking people to the conventional public transport network.

A second driver for change is the economic situation. The need for savings over the next decade is going to place significant pressure on public and other transport services. Already saving plans have identified reductions in subsidies to public transport services, education and health transport. Whilst it is impossible to predict with certainty the effect of these savings we can say with confidence that current service levels will be reduced. Reductions in current services will do little to address our unsustainable travel patterns as it will increase reliance on the car. For those without access to a car reductions in services will lead to less access to everyday services and activities and increased isolation and isolation. There is an urgent onus on all the stakeholders involved to work together to try and minimise the impact of service reductions.

¹⁰ For example see "A demographic portrait of Northern Ireland: Some implications for public policy" NI Assembly Research & Library Services 2011

Imtac recognises the need to make savings is unavoidable. However we firmly believe that much more could be done by agencies working together, sharing resources to ensure that transport need in communities across Northern Ireland is more effectively met. Our research shows that different types of demand responsive services can be an effective way to best utilise the resources we do have.

There are other policy factors that can drive change. In particular it is essential that we develop a much greater understanding of local transport needs. Both the Review of Public Administration and the Public Transport Reform processes represent an opportunity to consider local transport need, to develop innovative solutions and to address potentially difficult issues such as the licensing of services. In particular proposals for the development of local transport plans under Public Transport Reform should influence the development of localised services and potentially lead to a more joined up approach in areas to the services currently provided by amongst others Translink, Health Trusts, Education Boards and community transport operators.

Recommendations

Imtac does not underestimate the significant barriers that must be overcome before we can even attempt to develop more flexible transport services in Northern Ireland. Lessons from elsewhere show this requires significant changes in cultures within various agencies, sharing of resources, the development of specific knowledge and expertise and ultimately re-investment/allocation of resources. However the Committee believes that without looking at using more demand responsive services the effects of savings will mean it is much more difficult for many disabled people and older people and others to get around. This will lead to greater inequality in our society and ultimately lead to greater demand placed on a range of Government services.

Based on all the evidence we have looked at solutions can only be found if all stakeholders with an interest in transport work together. Therefore the key recommendation of this report is that Government here form a Demand Responsive Transport Forum. The forum should be multi-agency involving Government Departments, Health Trusts and Education Boards, transport

providers including community transport, representatives of users and potential users of services. The DRT Forum should be charged with identifying opportunities to develop more demand responsive transport services as part of the overall mix of transport services required across Northern Ireland. Imtac is happy to assist in any way with this process.

Appendix 1

Useful publications

Intermode: Innovations in Demand Responsive Transport (Dr Enoch Et AL) prepared for the Department for Transport & Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Executive (June 2004)

Good Practice Guide for Demand Responsive Transport Services using telematics – produced by the Department for Transport in conjunction with the University of Newcastle (April 2006)

Review of Demand Responsive Transport in Scotland – produced for the Scottish Executive by Derek Halden Consultancy, TAS partnership and the University of Aberdeen (2006)

Demand Responsive Transport: Towards Best Practice in Rural Applications – prepared for the Association of European Transport in 2002

Evaluation Study of Demand Responsive Transport Services in Wiltshire – Enoch et Al (July 2006)

Clare Accessible Transport – a case study – prepared by Pobal in 2009

Issues of Rural Transport Need – Final Report for the Department for Regional Development by TAS Partnership

Accessible Transport Strategy for Northern Ireland – DRD 2005

Making the connections: Final Report on Transport and Social Exclusion – Social Inclusion Unit 2003

Revised Regional Development Strategy – DRD 2011

Regional Transportation Strategy 2011 – A sustainable transport future public consultation document – DRD 2011