

Rural Transport Learning Network Roundtables 2023-24

Roundtable 1: The future of rural public transport 11 July 2023

Summary

This report documents the first in a series of roundtable discussions in 2023/24 commissioned and sponsored by Transport East¹ for the Rural Transport Learning Network and organised by the Smart Mobility Unit at the University of Hertfordshire.

The series builds on earlier roundtables hosted by the University of Hertfordshire between 2020 and 2022 to address the shortage of research and policy on transport outside cities and in rural areas.

The format for this roundtable was a two hour online meeting by Zoom and consisted of presentations by speakers followed by questions and discussion, both verbally and via the chat function.

The theme for this roundtable was the future of public transport outside cities in rural areas.

Topics considered were:

- Lessons from recent public transport initiatives in rural areas
- Wider benefits from rural public transport
- Ways forward for communities, operators and local authorities in safeguarding and improving public transport in areas outside cities.

There were 24 participants. Sectors represented were: national, sub-national and local government, technology/innovation, transport operator, transport consultancy, academic research, non-governmental organisations. Stephen Joseph chaired the discussion.

The meeting heard from seven speakers covering diverse approaches to rural transport:

- Beate Kubitz and James West, Padam - Frequency is freedom, but is on-demand Better?
- Andrew Highfield, Hertfordshire County Council - Bus Service Improvement Plan
- Lee Robinson, Transport for Wales – Rural Agenda
- Melanie Watson, Consultant – Future of Rural Public Transport in Cornwall
- Niki Park, Norfolk County Council – Norfolk’s Flexibus+
- Roger French, Consultant – Rural Public Transport, A Passenger’s Perspective.

¹ Transport East runs the Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence
<https://www.transporteast.org.uk/rural-mobility-centre-of-excellence/>

Cornwall County Council has concentrated on major investment and long term partnership with operators to achieve an integrated fixed route network. Cornwall is seeking to build ridership through low fares. DRT pilots in Wales have been successful and are being extended in places to replace fixed route services. Here the long term plan is for bus franchising. Norfolk County Council has combined DRT with school transport for many years and is evaluating a pilot using app based booking. Hertfordshire County Council is applying lessons from a successful semi-flexible digital DRT scheme to introduce digital DRT to in-house dial-a-ride and community transport services.

Participants repeatedly asserted that long term public funding is required for public transport to properly meet the needs of rural communities. While profitable routes exist in some rural locations and some authorities are already integrating transport services from different budgets to reduce expenditure, many argued that rural buses will never be commercially viable as a whole.

There was also strong agreement that rural public transport brings wide social, economic and health benefits which are not currently being accounted for. The Department of Health was singled out as a major beneficiary of good quality public transport services.

Geography and demographics favour a 'horses for courses' approach to designing rural bus services. There was debate about demand-responsive transport services; Padam has evidence that free floating DRT schemes are often not optimal and that better ridership and value for money can be achieved by constraining designs in various ways. Roger French said that there are many cases of long standing successful rural bus services, some operated by community transport organisations, which use fixed buses with flexible routing according to demand. There was agreement that people are reassured by certainty and the value of predictable timetables in a rural setting should not be under-estimated.

There is an opportunity for the academic and consultancy sectors to learn from community transport organisations which have been historically poorly understood and under-researched. The best community transport organisations deliver excellent service quality and customer care. These standards are also key to digital DRT schemes, where technical design alone does not guarantee success. The community transport sector is also expert in operating services under both Section 19 and Section 22 Regulations.

The focus of this roundtable discussion was bus services, but rail should not be overlooked. Rail is especially important in Cornwall and in some places existing rail stations could form rural mobility hubs. Leisure and tourism was also touched upon and will be addressed in a future roundtable.

1. HertsLynx and Padam

This was a joint presentation by Beate Kubitz and Jack Holland. Beate is an independent researcher specialising in transport outside urban areas, including shared transport of all kinds. She is working with Padam to assess the policy implications and barriers to implementation of Demand Responsive Transport (DRT). Jack Holland has worked for Padam for several years and has launched ten DRTs in the UK and Europe.

Overview

HertsLynx was launched in September 2021 with funding from the DfT Rural Mobility Fund, operated by UNO and managed by Hertfordshire County Council. Jack gave an overview of

service design options for DRT and how Padam has implemented them across Europe. Beate described the methods developed to evaluate the HertsLynx DRT scheme.

Most DRT schemes launched in the UK in recent years have used a free floating service design. However, in Europe Padam uses a range of service designs. It is important to consider the special qualities and characteristics of a scheme's setting and location. Different designs perform better at different times and in different areas. Service design can helpfully add constraints according to the time of day.

In France, Padam uses DRT schemes designed to be free floating services with constraints added at certain times or locations. A scheme may be forced to serve rail stations or visitor attractions at set times. Alternatively, along an A-Road with small villages nearby, a DRT will be semi-flexible serving villages but with fixed collection and destination arrival times. These designs have better patronage than free floating services. Padam's DRT schemes operating with a semi-flexible model in the periphery of Paris routinely carry six passengers per hour, serve train stations in peak times and over 95% of trips are grouped.

The area of North East Hertfordshire served by the HertsLynx service has a very low population density with a transport desert in the centre (4000 people with no access to bus services). The objective was to provide a service in and out of the rural area, plus allow travel within the area.

This service has a free floating design but is constrained in relation to six outer towns which are already well served with strong bus networks. The towns are Stevenage, Hitchin, Baldock, Royston and Bishop's Stortford. HertsLynx cannot be used to travel within or between these towns. This allows the DRT service to tackle specific challenges in the rural area, increase groupings and the number of passengers taken.

Evaluation

There is a concern about how to evaluate DRT schemes, to find good comparators and know when to use a DRT over a fixed route bus service. Criteria to consider include the number of people served, the relative speed and the relative cost of the service.

Metric 1: Number of people served

The HertsLynx system is thought to be currently serving approximately 40,000 people. The impact of the DRT scheme can be seen by comparing the area's 15 minute walking isochrones to a fixed bus stop compared to a DRT stop.

Metric 2: Journey time

To evaluate journey time, DRT data on some of the most popular origin destination pairs was used. A good example is between Hare Street in Buntingford village and Royston town train station. Here a car trip takes 16 minutes one way compared to an 84 minute fixed route bus journey with changes which divert off the direct route. The on-demand DRT provides a 32 minute journey.

Metric 3: Journey frequency

Frequency is easy to measure for a fixed route bus but harder for a DRT service. For the DRT frequency metric, constraints were added in the form of three train station departures from Royston: 0846 in the peak, 1018 off peak and 1828 in the evening. The journey time penalties

over private car were then compared between fixed bus route and HertsLynx DRT. Pre-booking times for the DRT were compared for one day, one week and two weeks ahead.

Fixed Route services showed big penalties over private car. In the morning peak the journey time was 112 minutes (penalty of 1hr 32 minutes over private car trip of 20 mins), 163 minutes in the mid-morning (penalty of 2hr 23 mins) and the journey was impossible in the evening.

DRT is very stretched in the morning peak because of the strength of demand; indeed the morning peak journey time is worse than fixed route bus. Whereas during the daytime, in the off peak, the penalties are much less: 25 minutes over car with same-day booking and 12 minutes booking a week ahead.

Booking HertsLynx two weeks in advance reduces the journey time penalty over the bus to under an hour in the morning peak and 12 minutes in the evening.

Metric 4: Resources

Another metric is to calculate the resources needed to bring the fixed route bus penalty (in journey time over private car) to the level provided by the DRT scheme. Currently four DRT vehicles serve 150 square miles. To achieve the same reduction in journey time penalties for fixed route services as for the DRT service across the whole area would require a huge investment of resources.

Benefits of DRT

DRT is important for many reasons. Increasing access to the bus is a huge benefit. But making journeys faster is very important. There is not enough focus in the public transport sector on the journey time penalty suffered by bus passengers. Reducing a journey time from 84 to 30 minutes is a very substantial change to peoples' day to day lives. It is also important to assess the benefit of making transport available to people who were previously excluded, especially young people who can then develop a habit of using buses.

In June 2023 there were 2600 passenger trips in an area previously without public transport. Surveys have found that 75% of users previously had access to a car. 74% of trips are shared and 10% are shared with five or more other groups. A very high number of bookings come via the app. There were 1300 different customers in the last 12 months. In terms of monthly usage, 20 people used the service more than 20 times per month with three times this many using HertsLynx 5 to 20 times per month. Most people are ad hoc users, especially for leisure use on Saturdays. The DRT service covers an area in the top 10% for car use in the UK and included some locations with residents in the top 1% of car use, providing the potential for meaningful modal shift. Trips are averaging 8.5 miles and 20 minute duration. A third of journeys are to/from rail stations.

Padam is working with up to nine partners in the UK and increasingly discussing how to use DRT to reduce public transport expenditure.

Funding and expenditure

In terms of access to funding, eight months ago Padam helped Hertfordshire County Council to partner with Dial-a Ride services. The aim is to collaborate with all community transport providers in the county and explore cross-subsidies. Potential sources for private funding include section 106 funding from development and working with Stevenage Football Club to

provide services for away fans. DRT can also be a good option in the early days of a new bus service. Looking forward, the aspiration is to use Digital DRT to reduce the fleet size for county council special educational needs and rural home to school transport. There is great potential to reduce expenditure by combining DRT with school transport. In Lincolnshire 350 school children travel daily on the Call Connect² bus service which has reduced the cost per passenger by 50%.

Hospital transport for walking patients is another future opportunity.

Conclusions and advice

Successful DRT design depends on demography, geography, existing public transport and the economic and political context. It is important not to assume that a free floating DRT service design is the best option. If a scheme has only two or three vehicles then some feeder services or semi-flexible routes will be better for groupings. The geography may also favour this approach.

Another recommendation is to be realistic about the business case. A scheme covering 100 to 200 square miles with 80,000 to 120,000 people, will need three to five minibuses and should aim to achieve 2,000 to 4,000 passengers a month after two years.

If funding can only extend to one or two minibuses, it will be better to focus on solving a specific problem with a feeder service or a semi-flexible design.

It is important to seek long term financial sustainability through blending and integration with other transport services.

2. Andrew Highfield: Hertfordshire Bus Service Improvement Plan

Andrew Highfield, Head of Integrated Transport at Hertfordshire County Council highlighted the challenge of the mix of commercial versus contracted bus services and work to integrate the HertsLynx DRT service into the existing transport network.

Hertfordshire is a polycentric county, with no big cities but some of the largest towns in England, alongside extensive rural areas. There is a mixture of contracted and commercially viable bus services, but most of the rural settlements have no commercial viability.³

DRT Integration

The county was successful with a bid for a Rural Mobility Grant in 2020. North East Hertfordshire stood out as the area to focus on, with a number of infrequent fixed-routes which do some work in the morning and afternoon peak to take entitled and non-entitled pupils to school and run around quite frequently in the off peak. Although even in the off peak, not all the villages in the zone are covered. For two years the HertsLynx DRT has provided a very successful service for North East Hertfordshire. Up to now, due to dedicated funding for the DRT, the fixed route bus services have been allowed to run in parallel. But work is ongoing to evaluate how to integrate the HertsLynx DRT further into the existing network.

There is little competition when contracted services in North East Herts are put out for tender, whether for bus routes, school transport or adult care services transport. There is a huge mix of

² <https://lincsbus.info/callconnect/>

³ This is shown graphically in the maps on slide 9 of the pre-circulated presentation

transport services with different fleets across the rural area, with up to six different services travelling to the same village for different reasons. The importance of a personal touch for some of these services is recognised, but Hertfordshire County Council wants to support this by finding efficiencies especially in back-office operations.

In addition, there are 12 in-house dial a ride vehicles in the county which are being rebranded and equipped with Padam DRT technology. The next step is a trial pilot in the autumn in a very small zone to attempt the truest integration of Dial-a-Ride and DRT, using the same vehicle for both purposes.

Community transport providers in Hertfordshire were involved in the drafting of the Bus Services Improvement Plan, with help from the Community Transport Association. In autumn 2023, BSIP funding will be used to work with two community transport providers, using Padam technology in their vehicles to operate a demand responsive service pilot in a very tight zone and with shorter hours of operation than HertsLynx.

To conclude, HertsLynx is now embedded as a brand, serving passengers, already doing some morning school trips and taking some entitled children to school. We need to understand customer preferences in rural areas for fixed but infrequent services versus flexible demand responsive options. We are very keen to escape the view that traditional bus is good and DRT is bad. We are now seeking the best mix for the optimum use of funding for contracted services where there is no commercial viability.

3. Lee Robinson: Addressing Rural Transport in Wales

Lee Robinson at Transport for Wales is responsible for the Rural Agenda throughout Wales which addresses all aspects of transport, the full range of options for local journeys and delivering digital services for rural communities. The vision, as set out in an annex to the Transport for Wales (TfW) Transport Strategy⁴, is for a bus link for ‘every village every hour’. Lee is also responsible for planning for bus franchising.

Three phase approach

The first step has been to define the scope of rural to ensure consistent and accurate focus on certain populations. The ONS RUC11 classification was selected as it provides a standard method of definition and the ability to link the classification to individual settlements. The subcategory D1 (rural towns and urban fringe) was excluded as it introduced anomalies in the fringes or urban settlements.

The next task was to map transport connectivity in rural Wales, using TRACC software to identify areas with hourly services from 7am to 7pm on weekdays, Saturdays and Sundays. This data is currently being updated as the original mapping relied on data from 18 months ago.

Meeting the twin goals of decarbonisation and modal shift presents some challenges. There is a dilemma whether to target volume or distance travelled. For example in North Wales long car journeys are common, so shifting ten journeys from road to rail on the A55 brings a big carbon benefit but poor modal shift. Whereas in South Wales, due to the high population, it is possible to move lots of people away from private car for short trips which achieves good modal shift but relatively poor carbon savings.

⁴ <https://news.tfw.wales/news/five-year-strategy-for-transport-in-wales>

Thirdly the Welsh Government has adopted guiding principles for transport interventions. These are being applied in pilot areas to develop an all-Wales methodology. Rural communities are offered a package of transport improvements (eg car club, e-bike, car club, better buses) and asked to select solutions applicable to the local area using a standard prioritisation method. The most detailed work is in North West Wales at Llanbedr between Harlech and Barmouth in the Snowdonia National Park. Rather than a deliver a high speed bypass to relieve congestion through this small settlement, Transport for Wales is instead putting in a package of measures including a low speed relief road⁵.

Enhancing rural bus services

Two pilot areas were chosen to explore the options for enhancing fixed route bus services to meet the Transport Strategy vision of a bus for ‘every village, every hour’. These pilots are in Ceredigion in the South and Denbighshire in the North. The costs for achieving this frequency of service have been estimated and the question now is affordability.

Fflecsi⁶ (flexible) bus services have been used in different locations across Wales. Pilots were due to be launched in summer 2020 but were affected by covid. These included pilots in Pembrokeshire in deep rural settings with dramatic seasonal changes in transport demand. These were so successful that Pembrokeshire Council is considering converting all bus services DRT to achieve better coverage. The services are not commercially viable but this is not the objective.

In 2021 a flexible bus scheme⁷ was introduced in the more urban setting of Blaenau Gwent particularly designed for shift workers. This initially operated from 5am to 8pm.

In the Conwy Valley DRT was due to replace all fixed bus services with launch date of July 2020. Due to covid instead there was a rapid roll out of 11 services designed to reassure passengers, providing social distancing and limited loading. This is now about to be extended.

Conclusion

Transport for Wales has found that successful implementation of DRT relies on the size of the scheme and good driver training. It is essential to size the DRT zone correctly; too big and journey times are too high, too small and the service is inefficient and ineffective. Driver training is key especially for drivers with local knowledge. ViaVan was used for the algorithm to generate routes but some drivers, without understanding the consequences, would cause chaos assuming they knew better routes.

In terms of developing DRT schemes, we are interested in whether we can do better at sharing information with customers in communities. For example, people can see buses running empty en-route to a pickup and might be keen to hop on the bus. Technically however, if their destination is different to the booked journey they can't use the bus.

In the Conwy Valley the DRT buses are very popular with youngsters which is good training for a future generation of bus users. In winter some young people use the DRT as a warm meeting place, hanging out chatting in groups of three or four .

⁵ <https://www.gov.wales/written-statement-road-review-llanbedr-access-road>

⁶ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fflecsi>

⁷ <https://www.blaenau-gwent.gov.uk/en/news/important-changes-to-the-flecsi-bus-service/>

Bus franchising

Transport for Wales is looking at the bigger picture and developing a specification for the ideal franchised bus network, regionally and nationally. This includes making the network attractive to customers in terms of frequency, journey time and hours of operation, but also seeking affordability for government. Transport for Wales is in the process of seeking tenders for services and the prices are eye-watering. This is due to a combination of the uncertainty in the Welsh bus market due to impending franchising and the escalating cost of operations from higher fuel prices and driver wages plus the drop in revenue caused by loss of patronage post-covid.

4. Melanie Watson: Cornwall - A Rural Perspective

Melanie Watson is an independent transport consultant working for Cornwall County Council. She has experience in London and for Transport for Greater Manchester followed by over eight years in the South West.

Cornwall has thrown significant funding at public transport over several years. It is one of the largest unitaries in the UK and punches well above its weight. Local politicians see the bigger picture including the benefits for the ageing population and young people to access education and employment.

Intensive investment in public transport dates back to the 2015 devolution deal⁸ under the Cameron administration. This investment focussed initially on rail since Cornwall has a rail spine along the length of the peninsula. Working closely with GWR and Network Rail the county council invested in infrastructure to achieve a county-wide half-hourly rail service. Next the bus network was replanned to integrate with the rail timetable, along with investment in ticket machines on buses creating a consistent platform for a strong public transport network. Through voluntary partnerships with operators, Cornwall has developed a long term vision and plan for transport in the county.

In 2019 this led to an innovative tender for all of the subsidised mileage in Cornwall (which accounts for over 50% of the total bus mileage). GoAhead was awarded an eight-year contract which delivers efficiencies by linking school, subsidised and commercial transport mileage. This was a clever solution as it offered an uplift on mileages for the same cost as previously. Thanks to earlier investment by First Bus (resulting from the growth deal) the county now has a very good quality fleet of vehicles across both subsidised and commercial services. There is an integrated timetable, under a single brand with all operators adopting a standard approach to marketing under an enhanced partnership model.

More recently, Cornwall County Council's Bus Services Improvement Plan (BSIP) bid was successful, in addition to winning funding for a bus fare pilot (£23M). The launch of the fares pilot was delayed due to covid. Currently in year two of four, this pilot tests whether reducing fares increases ridership and aims to restore bus patronage to pre-covid levels. Evaluation has been made very difficult by the national £2 bus fare scheme introduced by DfT in response to the cost of living crisis. Very interesting results, yet to be published, are emerging. The outcome to restore pre-covid patronage has already been achieved.

⁸ <https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/people-and-communities/2022-cornwall-devolution-deal/2015-cornwall-devolution-deal/>

Challenges

Rural transport networks are not commercially viable. There may be some commercially viable routes but these do not meet the needs of the whole community in a rural county. Rural bus services need to be pump-primed and subsidised. The funding needs to be found from somewhere.

Cornwall is spending over £20m pa to support the bus network and concessionary fares. According to pre-covid measures this expenditure is well ahead of many urban authorities in the UK. This represents a political choice supported by solid commitment from elected members. Post-covid, Cornwall will have largely the same bus network as pre-covid.

Revenue funding is essential to underpin service provision, but Cornwall failed to get this from Government as part of the BSIP bid. However, the funding for bus priority measures will have an impact in some small areas.

Cornwall has worked intensively to change mindsets. Rather than adopting an anti-car message, marketing encourages people to swap some car trips to the bus. The focus is to get people to consider taking the bus to the seaside or for a trip into Truro with the confidence that excellent quality public transport services will be available.

The DfT £2 fare scheme is welcome, as is the bus fare pilot, but it makes it very hard to make services commercial especially in a rural county where people routinely make long journeys. Under the DfT scheme, £5 or £7 fares are now £2 which will undermine viability. Long term, nationally this is a significant issue which needs more thinking about. The government needs to find an exit strategy.

Conclusion

Cornwall County Council firmly believes that transport is a lifeline and changes lives. As a result the county has a good rural public transport network and is bucking the patronage trend. Pre-covid and probably post-covid too (the data is still coming in) Cornwall is pioneering rural transport.

5. Niki Park, Norfolk 's Flexibus+

Niki Park, Head of Passenger Transport for Norfolk County Council, summarised the precirculated presentation. Agreeing strongly with earlier comments, Niki affirmed that community transport has delivered DRT well for many years. Unfortunately perceptions have been that community transport is only for older people.

Norfolk County Council has run DRT in the form of Flexibus for years and the key to success is all in the funding. Schemes like this will never be commercially viable. County and national government need to accept this reality and provide funding.

For many years Norfolk County Council has combined school transport and Flexibus in a DRT scheme. Despite integrating county-funded transport services and using section 106 funding, it is not possible to get the cost per passenger down. This is the cost of flexibility.

Flexibus+ is a new project which started in March 2023 and funded by the Rural Mobility Fund. This has expanded an existing Flexibus system with an App to encourage younger people to use the service. While the scheme provides a service to people otherwise without access to public transport, there are various questions being analysed:

- Has the App has generated more passengers or would they have used the service anyway?
- The App's digital booking system has added costs, yet only accounts for 32% of payments. The majority of passengers are paying on the bus when boarding. Perhaps web booking alone would be enough?
- The cost is currently £12 per passenger journey and 50% of loaded miles are one passenger grouping only. Is the model wrong, with too large an area and not meeting people's needs?
- DRT may be good for the passenger but is it good for budgets? Would an infrequent scheduled service be better or worse than DRT?
- Is the hub and spoke model really as good as we assume? Do people really want to change buses? Is the waiting area the critical factor rather than the waiting time?
- Is ticketing a barrier? We work well with operators on ticket interoperability but would passengers prefer a direct service?

6. Roger French - A Passenger's Perspective on Rural Transport

Roger French, former bus manager and now commentator on bus and train services, presented his experience of using bus services working particularly well in rural areas.

History

There have been no end of reports on rural transport over recent decades. 'The Country Would Miss the Bus'⁹ was a report from 1983 from the Bus and Coach Council (precursor to the Confederation of Passenger Transport) which posed many of the questions we are discussing today.

Twenty years ago Transport 2000 identified the policy challenges and creative solutions in the 'Rural Transport Futures' report¹⁰.

Rural lottery

Transport services in rural areas are a lottery depending on location, geography, and the location of the main destinations. However, we tend to overlook the fact that rural areas sometimes have very frequent public transport services. Examples include Balcombe in Sussex with frequent trains to London and Reston near Eyemouth enjoys eight trains a day to Newcastle and Edinburgh.

Commercial services

There are some very good operators and many of these services are commercial. A good example is the Lynx bus¹¹ service in North Norfolk operated by Julian Patterson. Visit the bus station at Kings Lynn and you will see an interchange buzzing with activity and customers.

⁹ <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1983/mar/16/rural-bus-services>

¹⁰ https://www.transportforqualityoflife.com/u/files/RuralTransportFutures_summary%20Sep2003.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.lynxbus.co.uk/bus-routes/> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lynx_\(bus_company\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lynx_(bus_company))

Resources

We should not worry about resources, considering how many school buses are unused in the middle of the day.

Employee contract buses

There are many successful contracted commercial bus services taking shift workers to and from major fulfilment centres. These offer an opportunity for daytime rural services, possibly at no extra cost since the private operators currently command a large premium for the travel to work services.

Local solutions

Circumstances differ according to local geography meaning there's a need for 'horses for courses'. There are many examples of well established and successful fixed timetable buses with flexible routing according to demand.

A prime example is the Wiltshire Wigglybus¹² which has been operating between Pewsey and Devizes for thirty years. The bus leaves the towns at fixed times via three villages but visit other villages if needed. There is an allowance in the timetable to guarantee the fixed stop arrival times. Key to the service's success is the reliable departure times from Pewsey. A totally flexible route presents a lot of uncertainty. When given a choice, passengers prefer reliability and predictability over uncertainty. The Wigglybus is a very low tech operation. The driver phones into the office at one end of the route to find where people want to be picked up. The driver usually knows the passengers and asks those boarding where they want to be dropped off.

A similar example is the Lincolnshire Call Connect¹³ service with phone, online or App booking and a mix of fixed and flexible routes.

Route 99¹⁴ between Chichester and Petworth in West Sussex is an example of a semi-flexible service serving a local hospital and supermarket. The model is simple and popular. Consultants are recommending ditching the flexible service and taking it fully DRT¹⁵ but that upsets all existing passengers which is surely a step backwards? Passengers are then thrown into a lottery for trips which they can currently predict.

Hub and spoke

Good examples of successful, popular and well used services on this model serve the Scottish Highlands and Islands¹⁶ because there are regular drivers, regular passengers and you don't need fancy hubs. Minibuses meet through buses at fixed times providing absolute confidence in the service.

Kent County Council tried this model but failed, perhaps because in a large town like Maidstone a rural minibus doesn't feel like a nice way of travelling.

¹² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Connect2Wiltshire> <https://www.salisburyreds.co.uk/services/SWWD/102>

¹³ <https://lincsbus.info/callconnect/>

¹⁴ <https://www.westsussex.gov.uk/find-my-nearest/community-transport-provider/details/api/type/communityruraltransport/view/route-99-compass-travel>

¹⁵ <https://busandtrainuser.com/2022/06/30/a-demand-responsive-rural-bus-route-that-works/>

¹⁶ <https://busandtrainuser.com/2018/09/22/out-in-the-outer-hebrides/#more-748>

Community bus

This is a huge and very successful sector and a very valuable piece of the transport jigsaw. Examples include:

- Cuckmere Buses¹⁷
- South Pennine Community Transport¹⁸
- BACT¹⁹ in the Waveney Valley on the Norfolk/Suffolk border. This used to provide a popular bus service on Wednesdays to and from Halesworth for market day.
- Tavistock Country Bus²⁰. This bus service is entirely run by volunteers and provides a good network using different routes according to the day or week. Famously route 112 from Tavistock to Dawlish across Dartmoor is the UK's least frequent bus service. It operates on the 5th Saturday of the month from April to September. In 2023 this amounted to two days of service 28th June and 28th September. The service is completely full, with 8 tickets available to pre-book and 8 allocated by a lottery on the day. The route is delightful

Funding

Finally there is an important point about the need for consistency of funding. A succession of fixed-term short-lived government funds for specific initiatives are fine but what happens to excellent projects like Cornwall County Council's when funding comes to an end?

Conclusion

Practical experience of using DRT schemes across the UK raises questions about whether they are good value for money and meet passenger needs.

7. Caroline Whitney, Community Transport Association

Caroline explained the history of DRT in the voluntary sector.

The Community Transport (CT) sector has been the home of pre-digital DRT for a long, long time. Indeed community transport has been propping DRT up for many years despite a lack of investment in staffing, delivery and technology. In the past year we have noticed the serious lack of knowledge about community transport in the consultancy and academic sectors. It has become clear that the reason for the lack of research into DRT is its lack of financial viability. There is no motivation to fund research in a non-commercial market. Also some research has been positively dangerous due to the lack of understanding of community transport. The CTA has refused to publish three reports because of inaccuracies. Researchers without relevant expertise have sought the views of only one or two people and presented highly biased conclusions.

We are about to start recruiting an advisory panel for an 18 month DfT funded research project into the community transport sector. We are also working alongside Ealing Community Transport with funding from Motability, to review all the costs and benefits of DRT including the

¹⁷ <https://cuckmerebuses.org.uk/> <https://busandtrainuser.com/2023/05/11/east-sussex-joins-the-drt-club/#more-44803>

¹⁸ <https://southpenninect.co.uk/>

¹⁹ <http://www.bactcommunitytransport.org.uk/>

²⁰ <https://www.tavistockcountrybus.co.uk/>

social value aspects like health. Everyone is welcome take part via an online system starting in the next month or so.