

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-045-2021/22

Date of meeting: 07 March 2022



Portfolio: Environment and Technical Services

Subject: Covid 19 Development Projects - Travel Local Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) trial

Responsible Officer: Stephen Lloyd Jones 01992 564000 ext 2414

Democratic Services Officer: Adrian Hendry (01992 564246).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- 1) **Continue service in its current form and cost, adding a trial of EV vehicles and accepting that better opportunities may arise to deliver a full DRT app-based zonal service elsewhere;**
- (2) **To note that we have delivered an important ‘service of last resort’ in 21/22 for key workers, some regular commuters/users and a rural community otherwise left with almost no bus service;**
- (3) **Further funding merited due to extreme challenges posed by Covid-19 conditions – as one third of interest has been from Harlow residents, Harlow’s (and ECC’s) financial support should also be sought in 22/23.**

Executive Summary:

DaRT87 launched Jan 2021 as emergency ‘hybrid’ Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) following the cessation of subsidy by Essex CC of Arriva’s 87 bus service. The Arriva 87 saw a 60%+ drop in passengers during 2020 and was costing EFDC £100k per year subsidy alongside ECC. A decision was taken to run a twelve-month, low cost DRT trial @£85k, minus returned fare revenue, using Epping Forest Community Transport minibuses.

Very difficult trading conditions in 21/22 due to: Lockdowns and slow recovery of bus usage; lack of confidence in buses among concessionary pass holders; major reduction in 5 day per week tube commuting; school/college disruptions; marketing reach. Recovery of fare revenue has been low at 2-3% of costs and whilst reasonable level of interest was achieved (1000+ online registrations), conversion to actual usage has been very low due to prevailing conditions.

Nevertheless, an important corridor type service has been delivered adopting some aspects of DRT (pre-booked journeys online or by phone, fully contactless fares) and in a lower carbon way than running empty conventional buses. A further year’s funding will enable a chance to prove something closer to financial viability and to justify ECC’s

return to supporting journeys in this corridor. This may also unlock ECC funding from any successful 'Rural DRT' bid they make to DfT's 'Bus Back Better' programme (outcome TBC), given the clear demand from Epping Green residents.

Other Options for Action:

Shorter Route

Most demand has come between Harlow (SW), Epping Green and Epping. Focusing mainly on this section including the station, would increase efficiency of operation and allow more runs with a semi-set timetable once post-pandemic demand is understood. The sections between Debden and Epping are covered by reasonably frequent buses and the Central Line. Any trips south of Epping could be pre-booked by-demand only. There is little evidence of demand for trips to EF Shopping Park but that is caveated by the fact that elderly and other concessionary bus pass holders have simply not been travelling much in 21/22.

Trial EV minibuses

Viable EV minibuses adapted to the needs of Community Transport operators have become available. Within current cost, we can accommodate up to three months' trial use to cover different weather conditions and to test real world operation. 100% EV operation could be a good marketing message, but we would need full confidence in performance first.

Report:

Positives: 1,096 viewers of [website](#) leading to 178 online registrations of interest ytd (16%). Examples of 'lifeline' users (NHS staff/users & others). Postcode targeted social media activity in SW Harlow by HGGT comms exceeded online norms. Good/reliable service. We provided a 'supplier of last resort' solution in a lower carbon way than running empty conventional buses.

Negatives: conversion of 'interest' to actual usage is low; fare revenue returned to EFDC is well below estimates @2%-3% of running costs per month; EFCT are constrained on vehicles, driver availability (incl covid impacts) and due to covid bus regulations had max occupancy of 6 passengers for long periods; two stage registration process (EFDC online registration form and then separate EFCT form) caused some to fall out of the process.

Learnings: 33%+ of interest is from SW Harlow residents (desire to get to our tube stations and educational sites); Epping Green shows highest % residents expressing interest (rural isolation); Unclear whether elderly are comfortable with approach (no evidence of others having problems except pre-booking disliked); biggest prompt to explore the website was the climate change consultation, but little new patronage came as a result due to the Omicron phase of pandemic.

The service in 21/22 has not conformed to the full industry definition of a Demand Responsive Transport service, especially in terms of operating only within a defined corridor rather than a larger zone with multiple vehicles. It has also not tested app-based booking and payment which commercial services like Arriva Click or D(igital)DRT trials such as [hertslynx](#) (which received £1.4m from DfT's Rural Mobility Fund + HCC funds) are deploying. There are still relevant learnings for Essex CC's DRT strategy and the service has offered an important lifeline/stopgap service in a crisis which we can build on for post-Covid conditions. Otherwise, better opportunities for Digital DRT services may emerge during 22/23 with developer funding.

Resource Implications:

It is recommended that further ongoing financial commitment of £85,000 be made to EFCT to extend the DRT service for a further year from 1st April to 31st March 2023.

Ongoing operating cost:

Operating cost per Driver/Bus route (2 drivers covering a 12hr shift)	£77,328 (£6,444 per month)
EV Minibus hire (LDV EV80)	£3,000
Marketing (including paid digital/print media)	£5,000
Total costs:	£85,328
Income from fares (est):	£5,000 - £10,000
Net cost (from)	£80,328

Some extra officer/IT resource is required to make the registration a one-stop process.

Legal and Governance Implications:

DaRT 87 has been approved by the Traffic Commissioner under a Section 22 license under the Transport Act 1985. These permits allow the holder to operate transport services for hire or reward without the need for a full public service vehicle operator's (PSV 'O') licence. Section 22 does allow ad hoc pickup of passengers at bus stops, although this was not done or promoted during Covid to ensure no overloading took place. Relaxing this would increase awareness and usage, especially amongst those less likely to be online.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

EFCT's minibuses remain lower emission Euro 6 standard diesel. As previously mentioned, viable EV minibuses have come on the market, including some approved for Community Transport use with full accessibility features. Costs above include at least three months' trial of a vehicle across different seasons, but committing to a full 12 months upfront could be risky. By April, we should also see a wider range of suitable EV charging opportunities, both public (eg Oakwood Hill East rapid chargers) and within the EFDC estate for our fleet.

Consultation Undertaken:

EFCT, ECC (Integrated Passenger Transport Unit),

Background Papers:

Covid 19 Development Projects Update

Risk Management:

If the usage of the service, as a result of continuing Covid-19 restrictions or lack of confidence among users does not increase, then the estimated income will again not materialise.

There is a reputational risk for the Council if the service is unable to perform at the expected level of service. This will be mitigated by Officers liaising closely with EFCT, ECC and other stakeholders.

Equality Impact Assessment

As per C-075-2020/21 Report (11/3/21)