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Local Transport Today

City-wide DRT pilot ends in South Wales

FLEXIBLE SERVICES

by Rhodri Clark

The Welsh Government's largest pilot of fflecsi-branded Demand Responsive Transport will end on 25 September, with the nine vehicles involved being removed from Newport. Although fflecsi will disappear from the city, it has left a legacy of data which has enabled Newport Transport to improve its scheduled bus routes to serve passenger flows which were previously little understood.

Transport for Wales launched the Newport fflecsi trial, funded by the government, in May 2020. The pilot was later extended and the number of vehicles increased to nine. Passengers used TfW's fflecsi app and call centre to book journeys between any points within the city. The software was modified last spring to direct users to scheduled services where appropriate.

The government's funding equated to almost £9 per passenger journey on Newport fflecsi services. While this is a high figure for a service providing journeys exclusively within



a small city, Covid-19 travel restrictions were in place for most of the pilot's operating period.

To help fflecsi users to transition to scheduled services, council-owned Newport Transport introduced enhanced services on 4 September, three weeks ahead of fflecsi's withdrawal. "The changes take into consideration a variety of factors, such as the continuing change in lifestyle and the necessity to replace cars with public transport," said the operator.

"The data used is in part from the Transport for Wales fflecsi pilot which will terminate on September 25, the feedback from customers and the actual usage of the services."

One "comprehensive new

service" has restored large parts of two previous routes. Some routes now have better frequencies and earlier starts and later finishes.

Recent research by Transport Focus found that some users of Newport fflecsi preferred the DRT to scheduled services and valued fflecsi's long operating hours, until 23.00. Others felt that scheduled buses were more reliable than fflecsi. There was also evidence of users being unable to book journeys at the times they needed and of short-notice changes to booked departure times, which in some cases made fflecsi impossible to use.

Some users were unimpressed by waiting in fflecsi vehicles at stops for up to five minutes for individuals who had booked trips but did not turn up.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that although the nine vehicles collectively provided good capacity, in practice there was little aggregation of user trips and loadings of one or two passengers were typical.

Three other fflecsi pilots funded by the Welsh Government will continue to operate, in the Conwy Valley, Pembrokeshire

and Blaenau Gwent, as will the DRT services Newport Transport established several years ago to serve the city's rural hinterland. Several other fflecsi services operate using local authority funding and TfW's expertise and booking system, and the established Bwcabus DRT services in South-west Wales have come under the fflecsi umbrella.

TfW said it did not believe that fflecsi had become less relevant with the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions. "In some cases fflecsi is carrying more passengers than the previous service did and has substantially increased access to public transport. Denbigh is a great example of this," said a spokeswoman.

"The introduction of fflecsi was accelerated in response to the pandemic, enabling people to book a seat, limiting capacity and maintaining social distancing and filling gaps in the public transport network which came about during Covid. As we come out of Covid, there is no doubt that some services will be better suited to a more traditional bus service, which has been shown in Newport."