

# £40 a ride subsidy sees plug pulled on poorly used East Leeds DRT scheme

## DEMAND RESPONSIVE TRANSIT

by Peter Stonham

Another major Demand Responsive Transport scheme has been abandoned before the end of its trial period due to extremely high cost for each of the limited number of passengers carried.

Introduced in September 2021 for “an initial period of three years” the East Leeds FlexiBus scheme was the first trial of digital DRT within West Yorkshire. It was supposed to be used to evaluate the impact, effectiveness and commercial viability of the DRT service for the wider roll out of the service model in West Yorkshire.

Funding for the service came from a number of sources including the DfT’s Better Bus Fund (£753,000), developer funding (£225,000), Leeds Public Transport Investment Programme (£1,160,000), the Local Transport Plan (£491,000) and a Fair Revenue Fund (£177,000).

Seven electric Orion E accessible minibuses were purchased by West Yorkshire Combined Authority at a cost of £1.5 million and a three year operating contract awarded to



First Bus for £1.49 million.

After 21 months, the operation is ceasing early as passenger numbers continue to be well below the business case assumption and costs escalating above the allocated funding. A report before the Combined Authority’s Transport Committee meeting this week recommends members approve an “early termination of the trial”.

The East Leeds Flexibus report makes for grim reading. The service is being used by only 242 passengers per week making 627 journeys. The six days a week service is therefore carrying just 40 passengers a day making 104 trips requiring six buses running over 12 hours a day.

The report states “at the current monthly cost of the service this

works out at £16.03 per passenger trip on average”. It goes on to explain the “recovery rate from fares revenue” was set as low as 15% in the Full Business Case but the service “is recovering only 12% of operating costs from fares revenue”.

Passengers failed to use the expected facility of connecting with other bus and rail services “despite through ticketing arrangements with bus services, and there have been zero trips to connect with Park & Ride sites”.

A survey in March 2022 revealed that 59% of passengers had previously walked or used public transport to make the journey on FlexiBus and only 9% had previously used a car.

“The scheduling algorithm had limited success in combining

customer journey requests (trip aggregation) to maximise vehicle utilisation” leading to an average peak utilisation of 1.8 passengers. Shortcomings in the software and app necessitated higher manual intervention from the AccessBus team with “additional staff resource to be deployed”.

Meanwhile, the developer’s £225,000 funding, assumed in the Business Case, is no longer available as the envisaged new housing has yet to appear, and operating contractor First Bus has said that it cannot continue at the fixed price submitted for the service. The operator was seeking an uplift “which would result in an average cost per passenger trip of approximately £40.00.”

The report recommends that “full lessons learned from this service” should inform strategy for future DRT operations.

• **Discussion of the cost and value for money of DRT has followed a previous LTT news item in May (<https://lttmagazine.co.uk/868/ltt868-27-1.php>) and feature analysis by Roger French, *Can 30 DRT minibuses really hope to successfully replace up to 40 bus routes?* (<https://bit.ly/46vvcxD>)**