

Ltt Bus Innovation

Wales tries hybrid Fflecsi and a smaller vehicle to tackle high DRT costs

DEMAND RESPONSIVE

by Rhodri Clark

A Fflecsi DRT bus service in Wales has been converted to a hybrid of demand-responsive and fixed route services, depending on the time of day. It will provide services from 05.30 to 23.00 at a cost which is judged affordable amid severe pressures on Welsh funding.

In a separate innovation, a new rural Fflecsi service is launching this month using a smaller vehicle which is in keeping with the very low passenger numbers per vehicle journey that characterise Demand Responsive Transport (DRT).

Transport for Wales introduced the Fflecsi brand and journey booking system in 2020, initially for pilot schemes in urban Newport and Blaenau Gwent and in rural Conwy and Pembrokeshire. Some local authorities used the brand and system to establish their own Fflecsi services in place of tendered fixed route services.

Before the Blaenau Gwent pilot ended in June, surveys by Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council established that people relied on Fflecsi to reach workplaces and Ebbw Vale Town railway station, for trains to Cardiff. Since 2 July, the Fflecsi vehicles have operated two fixed routes during the main part of the day, with demand-responsive services available from 05.30 to



Denbigh's existing Fflecsi service uses a larger vehicle than needed, but the new service for the rural hinterland will use a smaller vehicle

09.15 and from 17.45 to 23.00.

Over several decades, and particularly in the last few years, many areas have seen DRT established with public funding but withdrawn when the money runs out and the concept is no longer a novelty for local politicians.

DRT can be expensive to operate. The Newport Fflecsi pilot, which ended last September, had a subsidy per passenger of almost £9, although that should be viewed in the context of pandemic-related travel restrictions and the

emergency funding on which all bus routes depended.

Transport for Wales is keen to see if the hybrid services in Blaenau Gwent can now offer a model for other places. The services utilise the vehicles throughout the day. The fixed-route services should reduce costs and increase seat occupancy when demand is highest, while the DRT element ensures that niche journey needs at other times of the day are met. This could offer a way to reduce the costs of other Fflecsi services, or to broaden operating hours where

fixed-route services for a group of settlements are difficult or impossible to justify and fund in the early morning or late at night.

One downside of the hybrid model is potential confusion for users, for example if the outward journey is on a fixed route but the return requires booking. DRT has proved difficult to explain and "sell" to tourists, and hybrid services even more so.

Another Fflecsi innovation is being introduced by Denbighshire County Council with its new Denbigh Fflecsi 77 service, covering a much wider area than the established Denbigh town Fflecsi. The service is due to start on 17 July using a vehicle smaller than the nine-seat threshold for Public Service Vehicles. The service's launch was delayed by three months while the authority and Traffic Commissioner worked out which legislation was correct for the service registration.

Now that this has been ironed out, other DRT operators may wish to consider the precedent for reducing vehicle sizes. DRT is commonly operated with larger vehicles than are ever required, because one user's personalised door-to-door journey rarely overlaps in time and geography with another's. Even in the Newport pilot, in a densely populated city, there was anecdotal evidence of most buses carrying only one or two passengers or running empty.