

EEH Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) Schemes in the Region Report



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Introduction

Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) is a flexible public transportation system that responds to the demand of individual passengers, rather than based upon predetermined bus routes or fixed timetables.

This approach encompasses a broad spectrum of vehicular transport solutions, ranging from traditional 'dial-a-ride' services—typically arranged via telephone—to modern systems that leverage internet connectivity, global positioning system-enabled mobile applications for booking and navigation.

DRT is characterised by the use of shared vehicles, provided either by private operators or in partnership and by local transport authorities (LTA) using digital platforms to facilitate dynamic routing and optimise vehicle capacity.

This transition from manual booking systems to app-based system by individual users represents a significant evolution in how DRT services are accessed and being managed.

LTAs currently use public funding to support bus services that are not commercially viable but are considered socially necessary—such as early morning, evening, or rural routes. While services carrying 10–15 passengers can justify subsidy, some areas still cannot sustain regular buses, leaving residents without public transport at risk of isolation. DRT offers a flexible solution in these cases, complementing traditional fixed-route bus services.

However, DRT should not be seen as a silver bullet for the delivery challenges for transport for low-density or rural locations. On cost alone, the UK average cost for DRT provision (£10–£20 per passenger¹) is



¹ https://www.adlittle.co.uk/sites/default/files/viewpoints/ADL_Bridging_mobility_gap_2024.pdf

higher than for fixed-route bus services (£1.17 per passenger²), underlining the need for careful consideration when planning the deployment of DRT as a replacement for fixed-route bus services. DRT is best used in low-density areas, low-demand times, first/last-mile links to hubs, and early phases of new developments before fixed routes are viable. Integration with the transport network is essential and should be avoided in dense urban areas which already have strong commercial bus networks, as this can lead to possible risk of abstraction/competition if not coordinated sensibly.

Despite progress, challenges for DRT remain—including high ongoing operating costs, complex technology procurement, and VAT disparities between smaller and larger vehicles—which continue to restrict wider DRT rollout. To fully unlock these challenges will require a dedicated national regulatory framework, stable long-term funding, nationally procured digital platforms, and stronger procurement and wider transport-integration policy levers.

DRT differs fundamentally from private ride-hailing: while both use digital booking platforms, DRT is designed to integrate with the public transport system and supports shared trips and socially necessary journeys.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/bus-statistics-data-tables#costs-fares-and-revenue-bus04>

DRT within the EEH Region

Local authorities across the region have increasingly adopted DRT within their Local Transport Plans as a suggested means of improving access to essential services, enhancing rural connectivity, and testing innovative mobility solutions. Currently, several DRT schemes are currently in operation in the region, including:

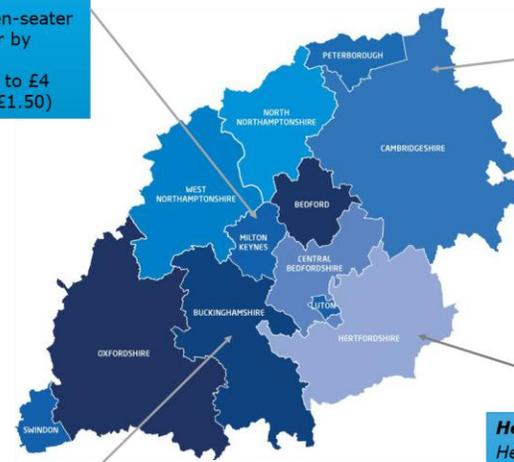
- MK Connect – Milton Keynes
- PickMeUp – High Wycombe
- Village Connect – Aylesbury
- Tiger – Cambridgeshire and Peterborough
- HertsLynx – Hertfordshire

MK Connect – DRT
Milton Keynes City Council and Via

- More than 1.1m trips have been taken on the MK DRT service, since it launched in 2021.
- Operates a fleet of 24 seven-seater vehicles booked via app or by phone
- Price per trip £3 (off peak) to £4 (peak), bus pass holders (£1.50)

Tiger on Demand - DRT
Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority

- Flexible rural transport across Fenland, East Cambridgeshire, South Cambridgeshire, and West Huntingdonshire
- Trips cost £2 per adult journey and bus pass holders free travel



PickMeUp and Village Connect – DRT
Buckinghamshire Council and Carousel Buses and WeMove

- Two separate providers operating in and around High Wycombe and Aylesbury
- App and phone booking service
- Trips cost between £2 and £3.00 for PickMeUp and for Village Connect currently £2.50 to £4.50 fare

HertsLynx – DRT
Hertfordshire County Council

- Launched in 2021, the fleet of 7 full time vehicles in operation, booked via app and phone operates in North & East Herts and Dacorum.
- On average it has over 5,500 passenger trips per month, totalling about 156,000 journeys

For each of these schemes a summary has been provided (below) covering the of type operation, delivery partners, main operator, technology used, geographic coverage and key learnings. This information was also informed by a workshop held with the local authorities on the 2nd of December 2025, with EEH:

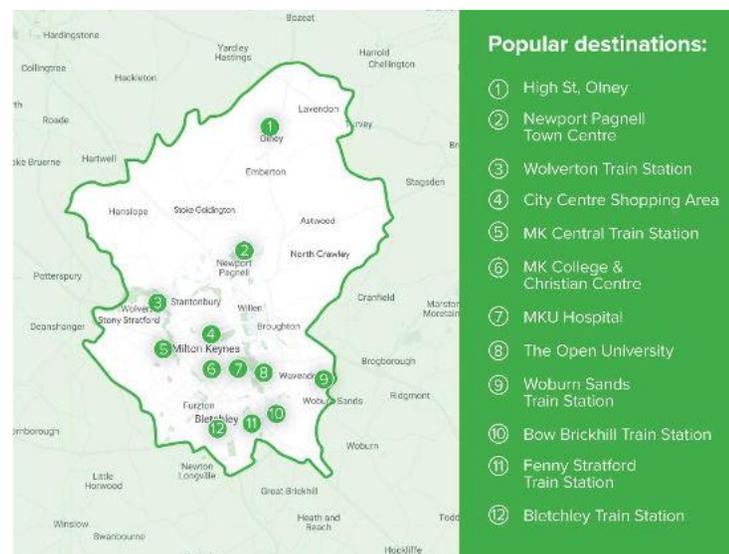
MK Connect (Milton Keynes)

Type: Replacing supported bus services
Lead Partner: Milton Keynes City Council
Operator & Technology: Via
Setting: Urban/Rural

MK Connect replaced 11 supported bus routes, offering a more cost-effective and flexible transport solution. Operating under PHV licensing, it uses a mixed fleet of electric and diesel vehicles, including WAVs. The service runs seven days a week and is bookable via app, web, or phone. Price per trip £3 (off peak) to £4 (peak), bus pass holders (£1.50)

Key Learnings

- Modelling scenarios with existing fixed route services and DRT will determine if there is a need for DRT in the given context and help with the business case for the scheme.
- Allow for sufficient time for mobilisation and internal governance.
- Establishing the scheme under PHV licensing allows for use of taxis during peak times and assists with driver shortages. There are, however, challenges associated with this arrangement,



including management of drivers, usage of public bus stops and perception of competition with the taxi industry. It is critical that the taxi industry is engaged early if PHV licensing is going to be used.

- Using a Dynamic Procurement System (DPS) can speed up the procurement process.
- Sufficient mobilisation time for publicity activities and stakeholder engagement is crucial to raise awareness among users.
- Usage data and KPIs are crucial to explore future options for DRT schemes (such as passenger transfers and zonal ticketing system) and develop an evidence base to support long-term plans.
- Specifying DRT in Section 106 agreements, where applicable, (with pricing based on the equivalent regular supported services) is beneficial if you know you want to implement DRT.

PickMeUp (High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire)

Type: Complementing fixed bus routes

Lead Partner: Buckinghamshire Council

Operator: Carousel Buses (Go-Ahead)

Technology Provider: Via

Setting: Urban/Suburban

PickMeUp serves areas of High Wycombe with limited access to frequent bus services due to topography and development patterns. It fills gaps in the network and supports new housing areas before fixed routes are viable.

The service operates weekdays with a fleet of wheelchair-accessible minibuses. Fares range from £2 to £3.00, with integrated ticketing and concessionary travel options. The app also suggests fixed-route alternatives when appropriate.



Key Learnings

- Working with operators who have prior experience enables faster mobilisation and incorporation of best practices from other schemes.
- Wording agreements around general public transport improvements can allow future contributions to DRT schemes if implemented later.
- Incorporating fixed-route bus and rail timetable data into DRT booking apps ensures passengers are directed to the best available option. Combined with integrated ticketing, this strengthens DRT's complementary role and reduces the risk of undermining existing commercial services.
- There is demand for both advance booking and live (on-demand) booking options.
- Robust data collection and clear KPIs are essential for monitoring, evaluation, and securing future funding.
- Allow sufficient time for internal governance processes post-procurement to avoid delays in scheme launch.

Village Connect (Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire)

Type: Complementing fixed bus routes

Lead Partner: Buckinghamshire Council

Operator: WeMove

Technology Provider: Padam Mobility

Setting: Rural/Suburban

Launched in August 2024, Village Connect serves Aylesbury and surrounding villages, improving access to the town centre and Stoke Mandeville Hospital. Operating weekdays, the service uses wheelchair-accessible minibuses and offers point-to-point travel via virtual stops. Fares range from £2.50 to £4.50, with free travel for concessionary pass holders after 9am. Supported by the Rural Mobility Fund and developer contributions, the scheme aims to enhance connectivity and reduce car dependency.



Tiger (Cambridgeshire and Peterborough)

Type: Replacing and enhancing rural transport

Lead Partner: Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority

Operator: WeMove, A2B Travel, Dews Coaches, Thames Valley Transport

Technology Provider: Spare

Setting: Rural (Fenland, East Cambs, South Cambs, West Huntingdonshire)

Tiger on Demand, replaces the Ting bus and provides flexible rural transport across Fenland, East Cambridgeshire, South Cambridgeshire, and West Huntingdonshire. It offers app-based, phone, and online booking between virtual stops, improving access to jobs, education, and healthcare. The service is part of a wider reform of the bus network, including the popular Tiger Pass, which provides £1 fares for under-25s. Trips cost £2 per adult journey and bus pass holder's free travel.



HertsLynx (Dacorum, North and East Hertfordshire)

Type: Complementing fixed bus routes

Lead Partner: Hertfordshire County Council

Operator: HCC in-house fleet

Technology Provider: Padam Mobility

Setting: Rural

HertsLynx connects rural villages to designated hub towns and rail stations. Covering a large area, it offers flexible routing and booking via app, web, or phone. The service is popular among younger users, especially students, and operates with a mixed fleet of wheelchair-accessible 16-seaters and smaller 9-seater minibuses (7 in full time operation). Fares are distance-based and reflect the government's £3 fare cap, with concessions and SaverCard discounts. The scheme is funded through the Rural Mobility Fund and Section 106 contributions. On average it has over 5,500 passenger trips per month, totalling about 156,000 journeys post its 2021 launch.



- **Key Learnings**

- Pre-arranged Tendering - Advance tender preparation enables a quicker turnaround for procurement and mobilisation.
- Vehicle Procurement Strategy - Procuring vehicles as LTA-owned assets allows flexibility for reuse in similar services after trial periods.
- Early Vehicle Orders - Pre-ordering vehicles well in advance mitigates risks of delivery delays.

- Customer Service Resources - Allocate dedicated resources for customer service during tender preparation and evaluation. Expectations for bespoke services are higher than for traditional fixed routes.
- Measuring Success Beyond Finances - Scheme success depends on financial sustainability, ridership, and positive social impacts—especially for isolated rural communities.
- Integration with Other Council Initiatives - DRT schemes can support initiatives like home-to-school transport and Dial-a-Ride services, unlocking access to additional funding streams.
- Importance of robust marketing is also key to delivery.

Summary of key learnings from DRT within the Region

DRT has emerged as a valuable but complex tool for local authorities within the region in responding to rising bus subsidy pressures, rural accessibility challenges, and the need for more flexible networks. The authorities have largely used DRT to fill gaps in the traditional bus network, not to replace fixed routes, and its success depends heavily on local geography, demographics, and the maturity of existing transport provision.

1. Why Authorities Considered DRT

- Authorities turned to DRT as rising subsidy costs made traditional bus support harder to sustain and service withdrawals were politically difficult. COVID-19 further reduced parking revenue that had funded local routes. Meanwhile, Section 106 and Rural Mobility Fund grants created an opportunity to trial new models. DRT was therefore introduced to plug network gaps, improve rural connectivity and test flexible services that could complement the existing network.

2. DRT Is Complementary, not a Replacement

- DRT performs best when positioned as part of a tiered network alongside fixed routes and mobility hubs. It is particularly effective for serving rural areas, cross-town movements, and communities poorly aligned with conventional routes. Authorities such as Milton Keynes, Cambridgeshire (Tiger), and Buckinghamshire have used DRT strategically to support future network design.

3. Costs and Patronage Remain Challenging

- Although DRT can outperform some very expensive rural fixed routes, many services struggle with:
 - Low ridership, especially outside peak periods
 - High per-trip subsidies (£10 urban; £20+ rural)
 - Dependence on ongoing government or developer funding (e.g. RMF, Section 106)

- Evening reductions often lead to significant patronage loss, while concessionary pass holders form a disproportionate share of users.

4. Technology Brings Both Benefits and Barriers

- App-based booking, routing algorithms, and real-time data have improved operational efficiency and generated valuable insights. However, digital exclusion remains a barrier for some user groups, making phone booking, community outreach, and assisted onboarding essential for equitable access.

5. Data Insights Are Highly Valuable

- Trip and demand data capture previously unseen travel patterns—particularly cross-town demand—and have already informed new fixed routes (e.g. Wendover–Tring). This positions DRT as not only a mobility service but also a planning and evidence-generation tool.

6. Branding, Marketing, and Integration Matter

- Schemes with strong, locally resonant branding (e.g. HertsLynx, MK Connect) and proactive marketing gain higher early adoption. Integration with rail, bus, and active travel networks is critical; without it, DRT risks duplicating existing services, adding cost, and confusing passengers.

7. Opportunities and Risks for the Future

- There is clear potential for:
 - Shared back-office systems
 - Better integration with mobility hubs and multimodal ticketing
 - Volunteer or community driver models to reduce operator costs
 - Multi-purpose fleets handling passengers and parcels
 - Future exploration of autonomous vehicles
 - However, public resistance to booking systems, subsidy pressures, VAT rules, and operational complexity remain significant hurdles

Summary Table of DRT Schemes within the Region

| Scheme Name | Area & Setting | Function | Lead Partner | Operator(s) | Technology Provider | Licensing Model | Booking Methods | Vehicle Type & Accessibility | Fare Structure & Concessions | Funding Sources |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|----------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|--|---|--|
| PickMeUp | High Wycombe (Urban/Suburban) | Complement fixed routes | Buckinghamshire Council | Carousel Buses (Go-Ahead) | Via | PSV | App, phone | 22-seat minibuses, wheelchair accessible | £2-£3.00 zonal fares; bus pass holders (£1.50) | RMF, Section 106 contributions |
| MK Connect | Milton Keynes (Urban/Rural) | Replace supported bus services | Milton Keynes City Council | Via | Via | PHV | App, web, phone | 8-seat EVs & diesel WAVs | £4 peak / £3 off-peak; concessions apply | Section 106, Council budget |
| HertsLynx | North & East Herts (Rural) | Complement fixed routes | Hertfordshire County Council | Inhouse | Padam Mobility | PSV | App, web, phone | 16-seat minibuses, wheelchair accessible | Fares are distance-based and reflect the government's £3 fare cap | RMF, Section 106, fare revenue |
| Village Connect | Aylesbury (Rural/Suburban) | Complement fixed routes | Buckinghamshire Council | WeMove | Padam Mobility | PSV | App, phone | Minibuses, wheelchair accessible | £2.50-£4.50; free after 9am for concession holders | RMF, developer contributions |
| Tiger | Cambs & Peterborough (Rural) | Replace/enhance rural transport | Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority | WeMove, A2B, Dews, Thames Valley | Spare | PSV | App, web, phone | Mixed fleet, virtual stops | £2 per adult journey and bus pass holders free travel | CA budget, fare revenue, Tiger Pass scheme |

Determining what makes a good DRT service area

EEH recognises that there are challenges in delivering a DRT service via the required 'ingredients' to ensure that it can be a success. This involves considering both local and regional factors, some of which are listed below:

- Availability of existing transport connections and hubs such as bus and rail stations, as well as local services and education.

- Existing bus service provision, both in frequency and access.
- Demographics of the area concerned.
- There is a balance between how 'rural' or 'urban' a zone may be. Services such as HertsLynx have urban places within a 20–25-minute journey time and we could look to broadly see this in other areas.

It should be noted that there are no specific factors that will clearly induce success but effective combinations of these can help deliver DRT.

The Department of Transport: Best practice guidance on DRT (2025)

The Department of Transport recently published its [best practice guidance on DRT](#). The document has been considered, and a summary of the most relevant information has been included and set out below.

National Policy and Legal Direction

The Bus Services Act 2025 introduces a duty for authorities to identify and regularly review *socially necessary local services*, including where DRT may fill gaps created by commercial withdrawals. Alongside this, the Rural Mobility Fund Phase 1 Evaluation (Dec 2025) confirms that DRT is viable only when supported by long-term resourcing, clear objectives, and robust monitoring. The DfT's 2025 DRT Guidance cautions against treating DRT as a universal fix, stressing that success depends on effective trip aggregation, meeting bookings, minimising empty running, and managing subsidy levels.

Accessibility and Inclusion Are Mandatory, Not Optional

Authorities must ensure digital and physical accessibility across all parts of a DRT service. This includes:

- [WCAG 2.2 AA](#) compliance and published accessibility statements for apps/websites under the Public Sector Bodies Accessibility Regulations 2018.
- Equivalent accessibility features for smaller vehicles where [Public Service Vehicles Accessibility Regulations](#) (PSVAR) does not apply, ensuring wheelchair access, ramps, priority seating and appropriate colour contrast.
- Compliance with the Accessible Information Regulations 2023, phasing in audible/visible next stop announcements across most local services.
- Ensuring English national concessionary travel scheme (ENCTS) equivalence where DRT replaces supported fixed routes, applying current DfT reimbursement methodologies.
- Maintaining non-digital booking channels (e.g., phone lines) to prevent digital exclusion.
- Accessibility must be integrated into procurement specifications, vehicle selection, software requirements, and customer support.

Structured Planning Is Critical (DfT Four-Stage Model)

The DfT's 2025 four stage framework reinforces that successful DRT deployment requires:

- **Plan:** Clear articulation of the transport challenge, target users, continuity of funding, and clear objectives supported by mapping and data.
- **Procure:** Detailed specifications on zones, hours, fleet accessibility, data reporting, KPIs, and software requirements—supported by DfT example templates.
- **Launch:** Strong communications, branding, stakeholder engagement (including [CT](#) and taxi/private hire vehicle operators), and guaranteed nondigital access.
- **Sustain:** Continuous monitoring, adapting zones/hours, keeping services integrated, planning long-term subsidy, and retaining organisational knowledge.
- Authorities must treat DRT as a **managed, iterative service**, not a one-off launch.

Procurement Must Balance Accessibility, Data, and Competition Law

The updated framework emphasises:

- Use of **DfT procurement templates** for software and operations.
- Requirements covering **data sharing**, including [GTFS/BODS](#) compatibility, reporting metrics, customer service standards, and accessibility features.
- Awareness of **competition law impacts**, including **Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) [advice](#)** on Enhanced Partnerships, to avoid undermining commercial services or breaching competition rules.
- Structured engagement with CT and taxi/[PHV](#) sectors through **qualifying agreements** where appropriate.

Integration and Open Data Drive Network Efficiency

Authorities are expected to design DRT as part of a **network**, not a standalone service:

- Aligning with rail/bus timetables, multimodal ticketing, and mobility hub development.
- Designing feeder and virtual line patterns to minimise abstraction and strengthen interchange.
- Ensuring compliance with accessible information rules and tracking any applicable exemptions.
- Integrated network design reduces abstraction, improves financial performance, and increases overall network coherence.

Clear KPIs and Evidence Frameworks Underpin Viability

Key success factors drawn from DfT guidance and RMF evaluation include:

- Low empty running

- High grouping/aggregation of trips
- High booking fulfilment
- Stable and manageable subsidy per passenger
- Social value outcomes (e.g., access to healthcare, employment, and education)
- Monitoring must cover patronage, cost per trip, occupancy, trip purpose, booking channels, and subsidy. Dashboards should support **real-time adaptations**.

Partnerships and Competition Requires Careful Management

Authorities must ensure DRT complements rather than duplicates commercial bus services. Collaboration with:

- **Community Transport** providers
- **Taxi/PHV operators**
- Neighbouring authorities supports resilience and shared capacity, while CMA guidance helps avoid distortions in local markets.

Fares, Concessions and Reimbursement Must Be Consistent and Fair

Authorities should:

- Align DRT fares with local bus services
- Implement ENCTS equivalence
- Apply the latest DfT reimbursement methodology
- Consider fare capping or promotions carefully, with explicit documentation in EP schemes to avoid competition issues.

Technology, Mobility-as-a-Service (MaaS) and Future Readiness

Authorities are encouraged to:

- Integrate DRT into wider **MaaS** platforms using open data and interoperable ticketing.
- Monitor developments around **autonomous vehicles**, following CCAV guidance and codes of practice where trials are proposed.
- Plan for **software longevity**, BODS integration, and interoperability across regional back-office systems.

Funding and Sustainability

Longterm funding is essential. Authorities should blend:

- Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) and Bus Service Operators Grant (BSOG)
- Section 106
- Health and SEND budgets
- RMF lessons for business case realism

Future costs include **Accessible Information Regulations compliance**, fleet renewal, and potential electric vehicle charging infrastructure.

Features of DRT Services

DRT services support a wide range of journey types, including commuting, education, healthcare, and leisure, often enabling access to local services in areas that were previously transport deserts. Their features

vary depending on local needs and operator capabilities. Below is a summary of key features commonly found in DRT schemes:

Licensing and Registration

DRT services may operate under various regulatory frameworks, including flexible bus service, taxi, or private hire vehicle (PHV) licensing. Each framework has implications for vehicle types, driver qualifications, service areas, taxation, and insurance.

Most DRT schemes are registered as flexible bus services with the Office of the Traffic Commissioner. These services:

- Serve defined communities or areas.
- Do not follow fixed routes.
- Are primarily for pre-booked passengers whose collective needs shape the route.
- Offer public access to all seats.
- Charge standard fares regardless of passenger numbers.

Alternatively, DRT can operate under PHV licensing, regulated by district councils. This allows use of smaller vehicles (under eight seats) and drivers without a Passenger Carrying Vehicle (PCV) license. MK Connect in Milton Keynes is a notable example. PHV-licensed services are not required to participate in the National Concessionary Travel Scheme, though some choose to do so voluntarily.

Vehicles and Drivers

DRT fleets typically include people carriers, minibuses, and small buses, with capacities ranging from 4 to 20 seats. Minibuses are most common in UK schemes. In line with the UK's decarbonisation goals, operators are encouraged to transition to electric vehicles (EVs), including wheelchair-accessible vehicles (WAVs).

Vehicle eligibility depends on the licensing framework. PHV-licensed services are limited to vehicles with eight seats or fewer, while flexible bus services can use larger vehicles.

Drivers may be employed full-time or part-time, paid hourly or per trip. During peak periods, services may rely on self-employed drivers, such as taxi operators, though this can introduce scheduling challenges.

Route Intelligence

DRT services vary in their use of data and algorithms to determine routes. Digitally enabled systems offer dynamic routing based on real-time demand, often within a predefined service zone. Users select origin and destination points within this zone, and the system optimises routes accordingly.

Pick-up and drop-off locations are typically virtual stops—safe, convenient points without physical infrastructure. Most operators aim for a maximum walking distance of 400 metres, though some, like MK Connect, average closer to 200 metres. Exceptions are made for users with mobility impairments.

Despite the lack of fixed schedules, DRT services generally guarantee pick-up and drop-off within set timeframes, balancing flexibility with reliability. Users may typically be shown a 'latest possible drop-off time' that accounts for additional passengers that may be added to the shared service. However, if there are no further bookings added to that vehicle, the journey may arrive earlier than initially displayed times.

Booking and Payment System

Modern DRT schemes use smartphone apps for registration, booking, and payment. These apps allow users to specify mobility needs, enabling tailored service provision. For those without digital access, bookings and payments can be made by phone.

Dynamic routing technology enables bookings minutes before departure, with real-time vehicle tracking available via the app. Payment methods include cash, card, and app-based transactions, though there is a trend toward cashless systems to reduce operational costs.

Ticketing and Fares

Fare structures vary by scheme and are influenced by the service's role within the transport network. Most DRT services align their fares with local bus rates to ensure equity for residents in areas without fixed-route services.

Fares may be flat-rate or distance-based, with concessions for children, young people, and pass holders. Some schemes accept local travel cards or offer integrated ticketing with other public transport services. Government fare caps, such as the £3 single fare initiative, may also apply. There are also possibilities to incorporate fare capped based ticketing, such as weekly fares, or monthly passes. DRT services may also see seasonal promotions, accessed via discount codes submitted through the mobile app, or reduced fares for additional passengers, encouraging larger, group journeys.

Applications of DRT

Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) can serve multiple roles within a public transport system. Its flexibility allows it to be tailored to meet specific community needs, whether in urban, suburban, or rural settings. Below are the key applications of DRT:

Enhancing the Fixed Transport Network

DRT is often used to complement existing bus services, especially in areas where fixed routes are not commercially viable—such as rural communities. By offering flexible scheduling and routing, DRT can connect residents to local amenities and services, helping to reduce inequality and support community sustainability.

DRT can also function as a feeder service in hub-and-spoke transport models, linking outlying areas to main transport hubs. This improves first and last mile connectivity and can boost ridership on interurban fixed-route services.

Supporting New Developments

In newly built or phased developments, demand for public transport may be too low to justify fixed-route services. DRT offers a scalable solution, using smaller vehicles to meet early-stage demand and provide access to town centres and essential services.

By offering reliable transport from the outset, DRT can encourage sustainable travel habits and reduce reliance on private cars. Over time, this can help build sufficient demand to support the introduction of fixed-route services. Funding for such schemes may come from developer contributions (e.g., Section 106 agreements).

Promoting Inclusive Community Transport

DRT can address accessibility and inclusion challenges by offering tailored transport for people with disabilities, low-income households, and those without access to private vehicles. Features such as wheelchair-accessible vehicles and user profiles that specify mobility needs help ensure equitable service delivery.

DRT can connect users to employment, education, healthcare, and social activities, reducing isolation and improving quality of life. While these services may not be commercially viable, they deliver significant social value. Operators should aim to reduce emissions per passenger by increasing occupancy and using low-emission vehicles.

Replacing Subsidised Bus Services

In some areas, DRT has successfully replaced low-frequency or underused bus routes. Examples like MK Connect demonstrate how DRT can offer more efficient, cost-effective transport by operating only when needed and using optimized routes and vehicle sizes.

DRT can also integrate traditional dial-a-ride services with broader public transport offerings, improving resource use and reducing operating costs. In Milton Keynes, for instance, DRT replaced several bus routes while maintaining service levels and cutting costs by over 50%.

Key Success Factors and Challenges

Setting up a successful Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) scheme requires careful planning, stakeholder engagement, and ongoing evaluation. The Department for Transport (DfT) has outlined four key steps for Local Transport Authorities (LTAs) in its DRT Toolkit. This section highlights critical success factors aligned with each step, based on lessons learned from existing schemes.

Designing a DRT Scheme

LTAs must begin by defining the purpose of the DRT service. This includes identifying target users, estimating demand, and selecting the appropriate regulatory framework. Key considerations include:

- **Clear Objectives:** Establishing well-defined goals helps shape service design, vehicle requirements, operating hours, and performance metrics.
- **Geography and Topography:** DRT is particularly effective in rural or semi-urban areas with limited public transport. Local terrain and development patterns should inform service boundaries and routing.
- **Optimal Scale:** DRT services must strike a balance—too small and they lack viability; too large and they become costly. The ideal scale varies by location and demand.
- **Sustainable Funding:** Long-term financial planning is essential. While many schemes start with government grants (e.g., RMF), LTAs should explore additional sources such as Section 106 developer contributions, BSOG, NHS or SEND transport budgets, and community infrastructure levies.

Effective Service Design

A critical step in the LTA process is ensuring the appropriate service design is selected for the chosen area. Principally, three different service design types are available, though they can be blended and interchanged throughout an area or throughout an operational day.

Free-floating: The most common DRT service design, enabling vehicles to travel to and from any location within a service area or zone. There are often little to no restrictions on journey possibilities.

Feeder Services: This service design is the first step towards supporting bus and rail integration. Through defining a clear destination at a fixed time, the vehicle has a guaranteed arrival time and permits a maximum number of pickups. This is often used to enable connections at bus or rail hubs.

Virtual Line: This service design bears the most similarity to regular fixed line transportation. However, the key difference is that with a preset list of destination points, if there are no pickup or drop offs at a specific location, that location is bypassed.

Underpinning these service types are often different service zones or areas. Different schemes often have zonal or mileage-based fares which may limit or restrict travel to and from specific zones.

Procuring the Service

When tendering a DRT scheme, LTAs should specify operational zones, service hours, vehicle types, technology requirements, and accessibility standards. To-date, there is often a mixture of procurements that have taken place, either for a single lot combining both the technology and operations, or two separate, individual lots, one each for technology and operations.

- **Inclusive Operations:** Accessibility should be a priority. This includes deploying wheelchair-accessible vehicles and ensuring drivers are trained to support passengers with mobility needs. In some cases, inclusivity may take precedence over other goals, such as fleet electrification.

Leveraging Technology

Technology plays a central role in DRT operations, from booking and routing to data collection and user experience.

- **Inclusive Technology:** While digital platforms streamline operations, LTAs must ensure services remain accessible to non-digital users. This includes offering phone booking options and designing user profiles that communicate mobility needs to operators.

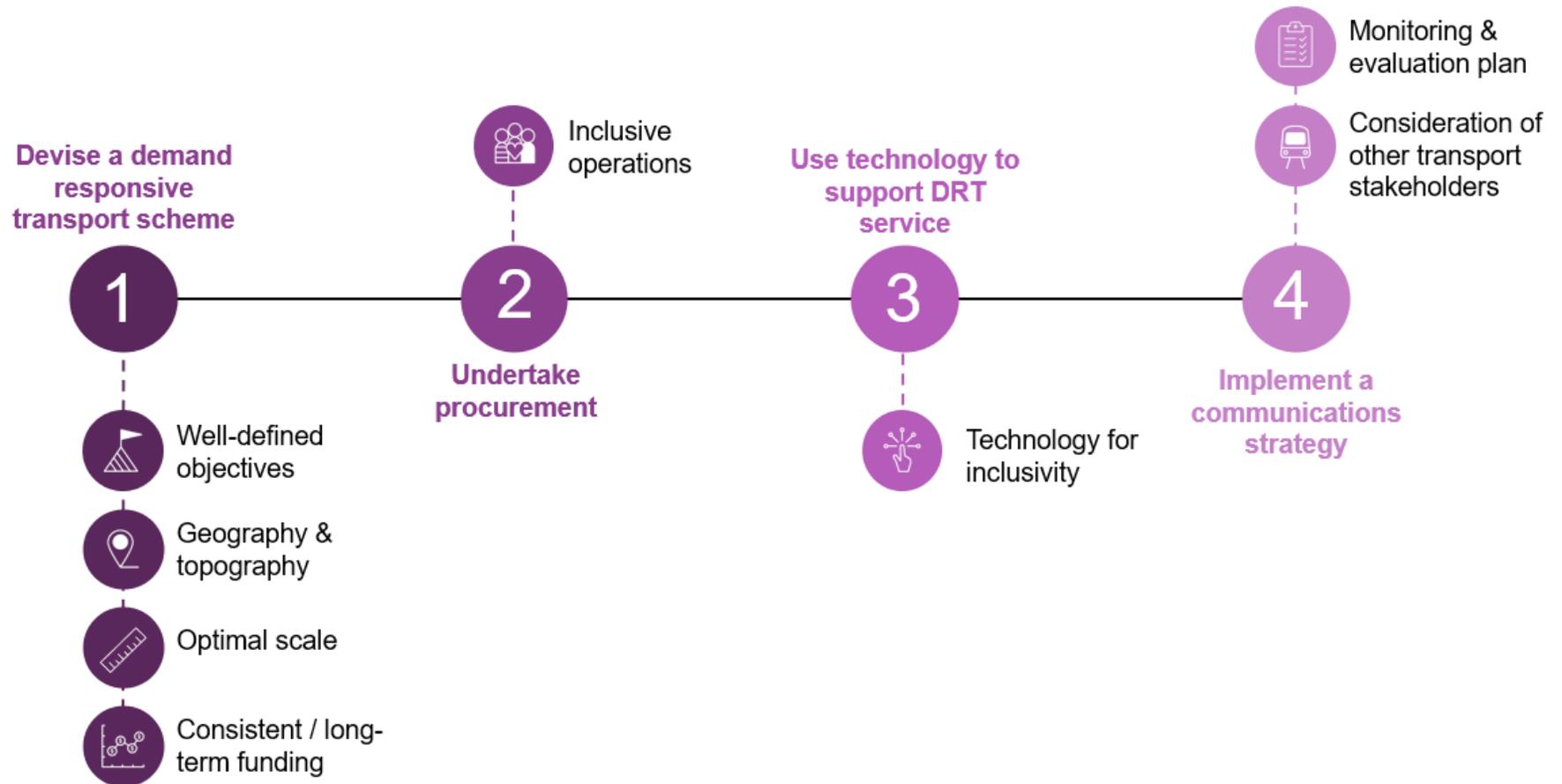
- **Supporting other transport modes:** Data integration through bus and rail services can help provide confidence in DRT services for passengers and enable greater multimodal use. This can typically be done through GTFS integration, either by direct liaison with the local authority or abstraction from BODS. This feature can be key to avoid or limit abstraction from existing bus services that may cover similar journeys to the DRT services.

Communicating the Service

Effective communication is vital for attracting users and building trust in the service.

- **Stakeholder Engagement:** LTAs should collaborate with local taxi providers and other transport operators to avoid conflicts and promote integration. DRT should be positioned as complementary to existing services.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Regular data collection and analysis are essential for assessing performance and guiding improvements. Success should be measured not only by financial metrics but also by social impact, such as increased accessibility and reduced isolation.

Summary of steps and key success factors for LTAs in implementing a DRT scheme



Future Considerations for DRT

As transport systems evolve through decarbonisation, automation and digital integration, Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) must adapt to remain effective. The transition to zero-emission vehicles will increasingly shape DRT, with electric minibuses becoming more common but electric has its challenges such as charging infrastructure, grid capacity and high upfront costs contrast with long-term benefits like lower operating costs and [LCEB](#) incentives. At the same time, DRT is likely to be embedded more deeply within Mobility-as-a-Service (MaaS) platforms, helping users plan multimodal journeys and choose between DRT and fixed routes. While this can improve user experience and boost public transport use, LTAs must manage risks around data control and market dominance.

Automation offers a further long-term opportunity. Since driver costs account for most operational expenditure, autonomous vehicles could significantly reduce costs and address driver shortages, with early international pilots showing feasibility in mixed traffic. Authorities should establish a clear framework to guide when and where DRT is appropriate, how it should complement fixed public transport, and what minimum standards should apply for service design, accessibility, fares and integration. Because DRT

| Recommendation | Rational |
|--|---|
|  Strategy & Purpose | Define problem, access improvement goals |
|  Pilot Design | Test specific hypotheses purposefully |
|  Network Integration | Integrate with wider transport networks |
|  Inclusion & Accessibility | Provide non-digital options, outreach |
|  Service Design | Refine service using demand data |
|  Branding & Awareness | Develop branding, run awareness campaigns |
|  Financial Planning | Plan long-term funding, cost recognition |
|  Operational Efficiency | Explore shared back-office functions |
|  Innovation & Futureproofing | Monitor autonomous vehicles, multi-purpose fleets |
|  Workforce Models | Consider voluntary driver models |
|  Role Definition | Position as feeder/infill, not replacement |
|  Policy & Regulation | Engage with DfT on VAT, funding |

performance varies significantly across existing schemes, a shared evidence base is essential. Common KPIs—such as subsidy per trip, trip-grouping rates, booking channel use, trip purpose and wider social value—can provide consistent measures of effectiveness. A centralised data hub or shared analytics platform would help authorities compare outcomes, plan services more effectively, and make evidence-based adjustments to operations.

Greater collaboration between neighbouring areas can further improve affordability and efficiency, particularly through joint procurement and shared technology platforms for booking, routing and real-time analytics. This also supports seamless cross-boundary travel and avoids duplication. Stronger integration with bus and rail is equally important, with hub-based routing, aligned timetables, multimodal ticketing and fare consistency ensuring DRT strengthens rather than competes with fixed networks. Inclusive design must remain central, with staffed phone booking, accessible payment options, clear passenger information and fully accessible vehicles helping to ensure no one is excluded due to digital barriers or mobility needs.

Financial sustainability will remain a challenge, given current per-trip costs and the rarity of cost-neutral DRT services. LTAs will need long-term funding plans that blend BSIP, BSOG, Section 106 and opportunities for integration with SEND, NHS or social care transport. Joint procurement of vehicles and charging infrastructure can also support future electrification. Finally, LTAs should strengthen procurement and mobilisation by following the DfT's Plan → Procure → Launch → Sustain model, ensuring clear objectives, strong integration requirements and consistent data-sharing standards. Preparing now for electrification, MaaS integration and automation will help ensure DRT becomes a stable, sustainable and inclusive part of the region's transport system.

Background: National, Regional and Local Policy Context for DRT

There is growing recognition and aspiration for DRT at the national level, as reflected in several UK government policies and initiatives. The Department for Transport's (DfT) 2019 publication, 'The Future of Mobility: Urban Strategy', outlines significant shifts in transport demand, including the rise of shared mobility. DRT is identified as a key solution to increase vehicle occupancy and reduce road congestion by enabling multiple passengers to travel together in the same vehicle (Section 3.25).

Section 7.30 of the strategy highlights the DfT's commitment to reviewing legislation governing flexible bus services. The aim is to ensure that DRT can operate effectively across diverse geographies, including areas that are commercially challenging. This legislative review supports the broader deployment of flexible transport services.

The strategy is underpinned by nine core principles to guide innovation in urban mobility: safety and security by design; equitable access across the UK; prioritization of active travel for short journeys; the centrality of mass transit; transition to zero *emissions; congestion reduction through efficient road space use; open mobility markets; integration of new services with existing transport systems; and appropriate data sharing to enhance transport operations.

In 2020, as part of the government's 'Better Deal for Bus Users', the DfT launched the Rural Mobility Fund (RMF) to pilot on-demand services in rural and suburban areas. Approximately £20 million was allocated to 17 Local Transport Authorities (LTAs), three of which were in the EEH Region. Further support came in 2022 with the publication of a DRT Toolkit, designed to assist local authorities in implementing DRT schemes across England.

The UK Government's 'Bus Back Better' strategy highlights the significant potential of DRT to enhance the overall bus network. It identifies DRT as a means to deliver services that are more frequent, comprehensive,

and safer. In particular, DRT is promoted as a viable option for providing socially necessary services, especially in areas where conventional bus services may be limited.

The strategy encourages the integration of DRT with traditional bus services to better align service levels with the specific needs of communities. This integrated approach aims to ensure that public transport remains accessible and responsive, particularly in rural and underserved areas.

Through 'Bus Back Better', the Department for Transport (DfT) has tasked Local Transport Authorities (LTAs) and operators with considering their local contexts and exploring innovative and bold strategies to improve bus services. This includes evaluating the potential role of DRT in modernising local transport offerings. Additionally, the DfT is exploring the introduction of new incentives to support the deployment of DRT. As part of the proposed reforms to the Bus Service Operators Grant (BSOG), these incentives aim to promote the delivery of DRT services and increase bus usage, particularly in rural communities where traditional services may not be viable.

EEH's Regional Transport Strategy (2021) states that DRT can be one of the key mobility options in delivering new approaches, ownership and business models that facilitate access to transport (see Policy 136 of document). Also, DRT is referenced as an intervention to address the lack of transport connectivity within its Connectivity Study programme