

Rural Mobility Fund – Better Transport for Rural Gloucestershire.

Background.

The primary objective of the Rural Mobility Fund is to trial demand-responsive transport solutions in providing transport services which work better for local residents of rural and suburban areas. The demand responsive transport solutions would either fill a gap in provision or complement existing timetabled series. The focus of the fund is on projects setting up services in places where they do not already exist. Gloucestershire County Council is therefore seeking funding to a demand responsive service in the North East Cotswolds and South Forest of Dean areas.

Key bid points.

The Better Transport for Rural Gloucestershire (BTRG) project aims to test the role of comprehensive demand responsive transport in complementing the conventional public transport network, in order to develop a template for such flexible provision across all parts of the county. It will improve public transport accessibility and connectivity across two pilot areas, offering real travel choice for all local residents and increase the attractiveness of the overall public transport offer, by filling gaps in the existing network, thus promoting mode shift and securing the long term financial viability of public transport in rural Gloucestershire.

BTRG will contribute towards a number of ambitions:

Improved accessibility:

The new demand responsive services will significantly improve accessibility for **rurally isolated** people, providing transport for many communities that currently have little or no public transport. Operating 0700 – 1900, it will open up access to employment, education, health, recreation and shopping, offering a choice of destination. Vehicles will have low step entrances, making them fully accessible to **all residents**.

Improved connectivity:

The DRT services will offer new direct links to a variety of local destinations, such as employment places, small towns and railway stations. Additionally, in line with Gloucestershire's emerging revised Local Transport Plan, the services will link to a number of **Local Interchange Hubs**, providing interchange with conventional bus services for onward travel to main centres, such as Gloucester and Cheltenham.

Integrated transport offer:

Linked through the transport portal developed as part of the Total Transport initiative, the DRT services will be fully integrated into the overall provision and promotion of public and community

transport. Furthermore, services will connect with mainstream bus services and through fares and ticketing provided. The centralised call centre and booking system will offer a step change in **customer experience** and easy journey planning and booking.

Greener Transport:

It is hoped that the attractiveness of the new responsive services will not only appeal to those with no other travel options, but may encourage people away from using their cars, thus **reducing transport related CO2 emissions**.

Boost the rural economy:

Gloucestershire's **Local Industrial Strategy** highlights Demand Responsive Transport as a key infrastructure need for the County. By providing greater access to and between rural communities and facilities, residents will benefit from **greater economic opportunities**. Furthermore, both pilot areas are attractive to tourists and it is envisaged that the services could encourage more green tourism.

Efficient transport provision:

These new responsive services will contribute to an overall efficient transport offer in several ways:

- Offer cost-effective provision through only operating in response to demand.
- Increase usage of existing mainstream bus services, improving their viability and the chance of them being enhanced.
- Integration with specialist community and social care transport, ensuring that the most effective service is provided to particular users.
- Use of one vehicle in each area to provide a home to school transport run, reducing the requirement for other dedicated transport.

Bid Proposal.

The BTRG project will see;

Four fully accessible minibuses (2 in each area) purchased by the County Council and loaned to operators to run the services under contract with BTRG drivers. Bookings and route scheduling will be utilising an existing, well-established Matrix Centre.

Service provision will generally be entirely flexible responding to diverse needs and demands. It will not provide journeys that can be undertaken using existing public transport routes. There will be some semi-fixed aspects offering runs for commuters to connect with trains at Kingham and Lydney stations, and connections with mainline bus services. To widen its demographic reach, services will operate from 0700 – 1900 Monday to Friday and 0800 – 1600 Saturday.

The services will operate between designated pick-up/drop-off points, such as existing bus stops or hamlet/village centres. Feeder journeys will link to local Interchange Hubs, offering guaranteed interchange with main services, providing confidence for users. Over time, there will be investment in facilities at the hubs, including shelters with seating, real time information via Smart Phone app

and cycle storage/parking. In the longer term, the hubs could become community focal points with community notices/information, meeting points, landscaping and more.

Journey booking and vehicle scheduling will be provided by Lincolnshire County Council; it already provides such a service to other authorities using its CallConnect product as a basis. Equally, it will provide the communications equipment for the vehicles. Bookings will be possible either by phone or on-line via ThinkTravel Journey Planner. GCC aim's to use elements of CallConnect's successful model as a basis to develop the DRT.

The services will have attractive innovative branding, marketed and promoted through the Gloucestershire ThinkTravel portal: <https://www.thinktravel.info>. BTRG will be marketed and promoted to a wide demographic and will target all users (both resident and visitors) within the defined pilot areas. Attractive fares and ticketing will help encourage uptake. Through ticketing with commercial bus operators will be agreed to ensure ease and convenience of travel via Local Interchange Hubs.

Various steps will be taken to ensure the services are cost-effective and sustained:

- Vehicles purchased by the GCC to reduce risk for operators.
- Standardised fleet to provide flexibility and economies of scale.
- Designed for a mix of different needs across varied user groups.
- Use of existing external call and scheduling centre.
- Two of the vehicles used to be available to perform home to school transport contracts.
- Developed in collaboration with commercial and community transport operators in each area

Initial demand is anticipated to be low, costed on a 3 passenger's per hour basis. Once established demand is expected to be focused along access to Kingham Station and the 801 service (NE Cotswolds), and focussed on direct links between Lydney – Cinderford and Coleford – Cinderford as well as interchanging with key Gloucester services (S FoD). However, the DRT will maintain an element of flexibility in its service delivery so that it can meet the user requirements of any given time, particularly in periods of lower demand, ensuring economic sustainability.

Funding Ask:

The Better Transport for Rural Gloucestershire project has sought £1.352m from the DfT's Rural Mobility Fund.