



West Midlands
Combined Authority

Transport Delivery Committee

Date	14 November 2022
Report title	Ring and Ride and West Midlands On Demand Co-mingling Pilot
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Report has been considered by	PPF MEG

Recommendation(s) for action or decision:

Transport Delivery Committee is recommended to:

- 1) Recognise the challenges faced by the bus market and the impact on / potential of Demand Responsive Transport in this context
- 2) Recognise the likely opportunities of merging ('co-mingling') of West Midlands On Demand and Ring and Ride services in Coventry
- 3) Approve the proposal to conduct a co-mingling trial in Coventry from January 2023
- 4) Given that much longer journeys will be possible, approve the proposed modification from a flat-fare to a distance-based charging regime for West Midlands On Demand and Ring and Ride in Coventry
- 5) For the purposes of the trial, delegate the setting of fares to the Director of Integrated Transport Services, on the understanding these will take into account affordability for passengers and the cost of providing the service and on the basis that single journeys up to 10 miles will be capped at £2 for those eligible for concessions on account of age or disability.

1. Purpose

To provide an overview of current operations of West Midlands On Demand and Ring and Ride and agree a trial of merging the operations of these services on a trial basis in Coventry from January 2023.

2. Proposal

- 2.1 As recognised by this committee, this is a challenging time in the bus industry. Post covid pressures, changing preferences in travel behaviour and rising operational costs are putting significant strain on local bus networks. Solutions are required that draw in new customers and create more efficient operations, whilst maintaining service coverage.
- 2.2 Rising costs and financial pressures may make it more difficult to ensure comprehensive geographical coverage of traditional fixed route bus services in the future. Even where services can be maintained, modern lifestyles often require access to a range of destinations that may not always be easily accessible on the fixed route network
- 2.3 Demand Responsive Transport, as being trialled through West Midlands on Demand in Coventry, is intended to address some of the deficiencies in the fixed route bus network, making a wider range of destinations more easily accessible, providing an attractive, affordable service for those who may be adverse or unable to use the buses.
- 2.4 The region's long-established Ring and Ride service also addresses accessibility challenges but is targeted at those who are unable to access public transport primarily due to physical or mental disability or other mobility impairments.
- 2.5 West Midlands On Demand and Ring and Ride, whilst performing similar functions, currently operate in isolation of one another. Different pools of vehicles are used and different booking and scheduling systems used. Both services are subject to different rules and operating criteria and it is considered that by merging the services together ('co-mingling'), the customer service can be improved, the current customer base expanded and amore efficient and economical fleet operation enabled.
- 2.6 Appendix 1 provides details of the proposed trial. Given that Coventry is the only area at present in which the two services operate, it is proposed the trial takes place in Coventry. Coventry officers and key councillors have been engaged separately and support the trial. Given West Midlands On Demand also covers the 'Meriden gap' in Solihull and parts of Warwickshire, these will also be included within the trial area.
- 2.7 Of utmost importance is the recognition of the specific needs of existing Ring & Ride users, and the trial is designed to ensure they do not suffer a deterioration in service, indeed it is intended by increasing the pool of vehicles available to operate the service the availability of Ring and Ride will increase along with additional benefits such as increasing the window available for bookings and enabling digital bookings and online payment (whilst maintaining valued telephone booking system and cash payments; both considered essential). Coventry Ring & Ride user group has been engaged and supports the proposed trial.
- 2.8 Perhaps the primary change for many will be the way it is proposed journeys will be charged. Presently both services offer a flat fare, but this does not reflect the levels of resource required to provide the service. Given that much longer journeys will be possible by merging the services a flat fare approach is not considered appropriate and a distance-

based charging system is proposed. This will be measured as a straight-line 'as the crow flies' distance, not based on routing.

- 2.9 Registered Ring & Ride customers, holders of English National Concessionary Travel Scheme (ENCTS) passes and those 18 and under will be eligible for half price travel. Fares will be set to ensure the majority of Ring and Ride customers pay a similar amount to existing fares, and indeed many making shorter journeys will pay less, but single journeys up to 10 miles will be capped at £2 for those eligible for concessions on account of age or disability.
- 2.10 Whilst possession of an ENCTS pass will be used to demonstrate eligibility for discounted travel there is not a statutory requirement for demand responsive services to carry passengers for free. All of the funding for this trial is ring-fenced within existing Ring and Ride and West Midlands On Demand budgets and there will be no recharge to ENCTS budgets.
- 2.11 It is important that TfWM is able to be flexible and responsive to the market in setting fares, so for the purposes of the trial it is recommended that the level of fares charged are delegated to the Director of Integrated Transport Services to ensure these can be kept under continuous review.
- 2.12 The combined service will be branded as West Midlands On Demand. There will be an extensive communications campaign with existing Ring & Ride customers to ensure they are aware of this change. Whilst vehicles will be branded differently, vehicles will remain fully accessible and drivers continue to meet very high care standards as present.
- 2.13 Appendix 1 also sets out the proposed approach to customer communications, contractual arrangements for service delivery, how the trial will be monitored and measures of success.
- 2.14 If considered successful the trial may be made permanent and consideration given to how a combined approach to Ring and Ride and DRT could be rolled out across the wider region

3. Programme

Phase 1: January 2023 for up to 4 months - Understanding co-mingling parameters.

All fleet operations migrated to use the same back-office systems, operating the same booking channels for all riders and ensuring appropriate levels of priority for Ring & Ride users. Utilise the parameters within the software system to tune system attributes to different customer sets, understanding tolerances (e.g. wait time, walk time, proposal time). System used to highlight and drive service efficiency without changing number of vehicles.

Phase 2: May 2023 for (max) 3-4 months - Fleet Optimisation.

For all current and adopted fleets it is proposed there are no reductions during Phase 1. As part of Phase 2 the focus will be to optimize fleet numbers during the day and to optimize vehicle size. This will inform the true costs of service operation. As part of this exercise, simulation of fixed line substitution / cohabitation can also occur.

Phase 3: Aug 2023 for 3 months - Planning ahead of further expansion

Insights delivered via Phase 1 and 2 can be used to agree the immediate concerns over R&R rollout in Coventry and the future of WM on Demand. Equally, decisions about depots, rolling out DRT opportunities elsewhere in the region can be simulated more robustly and agreement reached on next steps.

4. Financial Implications

- 4.1 The purpose of this pilot is to establish whether there is an alternative delivery model which will provide a good customer transport proposition at an affordable price and encourage more people to travel sustainably. The cost of the pilot will be funded from the WMOD budget which comprises a combination of FTZ and Section 106 monies and a contribution from Warwick University. This budget will fund the one-off costs associated with the pilot, including rebranding, system modifications and monitoring and evaluation costs, outlined in section 10 of the report. The project will also fund the cost of returning Ring and Ride branding to vehicles if the pilot is deemed unsuccessful.
- 4.2 The project should not adversely impact the existing Ring and Ride budget and, if successful, should provide a competitive price for the service going forward, generating efficiencies. The work will be done in conjunction with the Supported Travel Policy review, reflecting any policy directions and with any findings feeding into that work.

5. Legal Implications

- 5.1 The provision of both Ring & Ride and West Midlands On Demand are within the powers of WMCA.
- 5.2 To effect the trial there will be contractual considerations associated with the contracts for services currently provided by NEAT and Coach Scanner (operations) and Liftango and Via (back office systems). This will be subject to further detailed consideration once the agreement to proceed is received.

6. Equalities Implications

A full Equalities Impact Assessment has been undertaken and is included in Appendix 1 (Annex III)

7. Geographical Area of Report's Implications

The proposed trial will primarily take place in Coventry, also noting the West Midlands On Demand area incorporates parts of the 'Meriden Gap' in Solihull and parts of Warwickshire, which will also therefore be part of the trial area. If successful, consideration will be given to how a combined approach to Ring & Ride and DRT could be implemented across the wider region. This will be subject to a future report.

8. Schedule of Background Papers

Appendix 1 – DRT Co-mingling Trial Detailed Proposal (including Annex 1 - Comparison on R&R, WMoD and Co-mingling service parameters).

Annex 2 – Communications and Marketing Proposal

Annex 3 – Equalities Impact Assessment