Rural Community Transport Project RIDE

RIDE: YOUR LOCAL SERVICE THAT HELPS YOU GO PLACE IN SUFFOLK

This project developed a new digital tool to give better visibility of community transport. The project was undertaken in partnership with a neighbouring UK local government (Essex County Council) and based on the extensive research by FutureGov to look at how community transport demand responsive services could be made more visible in rural areas. An online booking tool was developed and tested by engaging with communities using social media, encouraging them to book in their rides in advance using the RIDE website.

About LIKE!

Local governments, citizens, universities and SMEs come together to co-create smarter, more efficient and more innovative services through 9 transnational pilots that cover 3 core themes:

Innovation Culture Approach

Smart Services

Digital Dashboards

Relations to Workpackages

This project delivers new forms of digital engagement for better service, design and delivery. RIDE also develops new types of inclusive services. The aim of the pilot was to engage with communities to give them visibility of Community Transport services and test the use of online booking.

Local partners

Essex County Council
www.essex.gov.uk

TVN
www.thevoluntarynetwork.org/community-transport

BSEVC
www.bsevc.co.uk/rural-transport-mid-suffolk

Background

FutureGov, who specialises in digital solutions for public services, undertook user based research and concluded that although community transport had sprung up to fill the gaps left by the demise of commercial service there were 2 problems:

- **Perception** – community transport services were positioned for elderly or specific user groups like dial-a-ride so were not made desirable for all people who require transport in rural areas;
- **Awareness** – many people were unaware the services existed and the suppliers commissioning them are unaware of the true demand – where people want to go and when.

FutureGov built a platform to grow a two-sided market for demand responsive transport in rural areas. A website called RIDE provided a digital product to facilate booking transactions. Operators could input information about routes they were running, and customers could see, book and pay on line for trips. Customers also got text messages by phone to remind them of their trips. Potential customers could also suggest routes.

The Pilot

From Feb 2018 to 31st January 2019 a pilot ran, using marketing on the RIDE website for online booking. Essex County Council did a small pilot with one taxi operator. Suffolk County Council (SCC) operated the pilot in Suffolk acting as the platform operator, taking responsibility for:

- Uploading routes, bus stop descriptions, timings and fares;

- Passing on requests for services or speculative requests for routes, to operators (Operators responded direct to customers via email or phone);

- Promoting routes on Facebook by researching local groups in the areas where routes were running, asking for permission to post in these groups using an officer personal profile

- Tweeting regularly about availability of the service;

- Designing and producing 4,000 post cards plus posters for distribution in the communities served by the services, but mainly on

Two community transport operators volunteered to put routes up on the RIDE website. The Voluntary Network put Newmarket to Haverhill up first in February 2018 for the start of the pilot. This service (Monday to Friday) advertised some intermediate stops in 6 villages (Kedington, Lidgate, Hargrave, Wickhambrook, Hundon and Assington Green) on some days and Newmarket Academy on Thursdays. There were about 3 runs a day.

BSEVC put up 2 routes, between Stradbroke and Framlingham (with stops in 3 villages, Wilby, Brundish and Dennington) and Brundish to Halesworth (stopping in 4 villages, Laxfield, Ubberstone Green, Hevingham and Walpole) in June 2018. In August a new route from Haverhill to West Suffolk Hospital was launched as a pilot service to meet a requests made on "suggest a route" and that resonated with requests in the past. This was intended to provide a test to the marketing strategy using social media to see how news of a new service was communicated and if it boosted the use of the RIDE booking site.

A comprehensive marketing strategy has been undertaken including TV, newspaper, posters, postcards, social media, Facebook and twitter over the 5 month period. The WSH route was launched by MP and Health Minister Matt Hancock and include the Chief Executive of West Suffolk Hospital. The social media campaign was a new approach for community transport services, run by SCC Passenger Transport Unit marketing team. For Facebook in the 3 areas of the routes uploaded:

- West Suffolk (operator TVN) 58 local groups were identified in the Haverhill - Newmarket area of which 22 allowed us to post to their group, reaching potentially 75,611 people.

- Central Suffolk (operator BSEVC) 49 groups identified of which 14 allowed us to post, reaching potentially 23,908 people.
- West Suffolk Hospital route a further 20 groups identified, 8 allowed us to post reaching potentially 18,438 people.

New service
Haverhill - West Suffolk Hospital

RIDE
Your local service that helps you go places in Suffolk

A new service between Haverhill and West Suffolk Hospital, via the villages of Chedburgh and Wickhambrook.
To book your seat or find out more, head to **bookyourride.co.uk** or call **01638 608022**

@bookyourride

Working in partnership with
CONNECTING COMMUNITIES

A Facebook boost was done for £49 in September for 25 days that reached just under 7,000 of which 357 clicked on the link and 17 shared it. We pushed at the boundaries of Facebook advertising operations and unfortunetely ended up with a 20 day ban on our profile. We were using a personal profile to advertise a service, but only to those groups that accepted our profile, who knew we were promoting a local travel service that would be of local interest. In all, 17 different Ride adverts were put on Twitter, and the Ride advert was the pinned tweet at the top of officer Facebook profile for the majority of the time.

Month	Total trips Single	Number booked on RIDE	Direct booking	Number from Haverhill	Other villages
August	44	4	40	38	1 Hargrave, 2 Kedington, 1 Hundon
September	56	18	38	53	2 Hundon, 1 Bury
October	51	12	39	46	1 Depden, 4 Kedington
November	67	11	56	59	1 BSE, 5 Hundon, 2 Wickhambrook
December	64	10	54	54	2 Cowlinge, 4 Kedington, 4 Wickhambrook
	218	45	173	194	20

West Suffolk Hospital route sub set figures

Results

From the period when the website was available in February 2018 to 8 January 2019:

- **20** unique passengers have booked on line and of these 9 (45%) prepaid by card.
- **128** bookings (232 journeys) were made on all routes available.
- **75** % of the bookings (96) were pre-paid by card.
- **76** % of the on-line pre-paid journeys were made by 1 person using the Haverhill to Newmarket route.

Only one trip was booked on line for the East Suffolk routes. This suggests the RIDE marketing was not effective in this area but could also reflect the population demographic of older people not using smartcards and online services.

The West Suffolk Hospital route started 1 August 2018 for a 6 month pilot. The route was advertised on RIDE as running from Haverhill to WSH with stopping points at Chedburgh and Wickhambrook.

The service was demand responsive and people in villages along the route could also book on but these bookings had to be by phone because of the complexity of adding 20 villages and suggested timings on the RIDE web portal. Postcards were produced to be left in village halls and hospital clinics that made it clear you could book on line for Haverhill, Chedburgh and Wickhambrook but phone for all other locations on route.

- Only 10 passengers that paid online over the 5 month period made return trips for £8.
- Most online payers made single trips, paying £5 from Haverhill to WSH and found an alternative way back.

This route costs £275 per day to run. It needs 34 passengers a day to be self-sustaining (3,570 trips in 21 weeks) so is currently only 6.1% of what is needed although this rose to 9% for the month of December.

Lessons learned and conclusions

Many lessons were learnt about marketing strategy using social media, operators readiness to absorb new ways of working and customer preferences. The platform needs considerable development to get to a valuable product. We now don't have the money for further development or the staff to develop a sustainable business model and there seems little value keeping it going for the benefit of 20 regular users. It cost £5000 to keep going for 6 months to the end of October (Suffolk contribution) and a further £1,200 for 3 months to end of January 2019 when just Suffolk was using the website.

Customer lessons:

- Price matters – especially when trying to convert people from car to alternatives.
- Customers want to see the price up front and not be surprised. The website had limited flexibility and customers had to start a booking to see the price.
- Existing customers already use the bus through their own channels – to change habits is a challenge.
- The Facebook advertising had some success in attracting new customers to bus and different age groups.
- To entice new customers we may need to show where someone can go, not just how they can get there (doctors, play group, art class...).
- Those that use online booking are also prepared to do online payment. On line payment is not currently offered by community transport operators.

References

1. Ride Operational Service blueprint (FutureGov) April 2018

2. Ready for Innovation - Practical guidance on the opportunities to transform rural transport (report written by FutureGov based

Things have moved on in the meantime:

- Suffolkonboard now has a page on the Journey planner so when the planner suggests book a section of the trip with Connecting Communities, you can fill a form in there and then and it will go to the operator. This was made live in December 2018 and already 22 people have used it. Operators are coming to terms with the implications for their processes but it's a start and all of them are involved.

- ArrivaClick – a service is due to start in June in Bury St Edmunds linked to S106 money for a new housing development. This is an app based booking service that enables online booking of a demand responsive minibus. This is very similar to RIDE but is more developed, being used in Liverpool and Sittingbourne.

Next steps

1. Continue to work with community transport operators to encourage the use of online booking. If a propriety app became available we know what sort of functionality we are looking for and the potential for integration into the existing booking systems needs to be a key up front consideration.

2. Explore travel needs in March 2019 through the planned community conversations to understand the emerging expectation of on-line travel services.

3. A Danish local authority is looking at a very similar problem in Aalborg under the LIKE! EU programme. Following a teleconference with them where we shared our experience we are looking at a transnational case study potentially involving Angus Council (Scotland), exploring the different approaches we have taken to travel services in rural areas.

4. Monitor success of ArrivaClick in Bury St Edmunds starting in June to see level of success of this online booking platform.