



The Wigglybus

End of term review

September 2002



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Introduction

This review looks back over the first three years of Wigglybus operation and points the way to some issues for the next three, now secured through the 2002 Rural Challenge Bid grant. Many of the issues were raised in the mid term review, published 15 months ago, and still require a series of actions, particularly in the regulatory and financial framework within which all public transport must operate. These include the question of a new category of registration for demand responsive services - the current system inhibits the full potential of DRT; and the way in which the tendering process has led to price inflation from bus operators. The latter is at least partly a hangover from the 1985 Transport Act.

The Wigglybus itself was fortunate in having much groundwork completed before the Rural Bus Challenge Fund was announced and thus was able to move to rapid implementation. Services set out in the 1998 Bid started in May 1999, less than six months after the grant was approved. Considering that new vehicles had to be specified and ordered, and a call centre operation set up, the then Minister of Transport, Glenda Jackson, called this a "miracle" at the official launch. The service has proved popular and is still at the leading edge of demand responsive transport, now experimenting with evening services and rail links. Its Travel Club provides a way for people to enjoy lower fares and help develop the service. Involvement of a community partner has built support and had beneficial impact on other transport schemes.

After strong growth, particularly in 2000, the Wigglybus hit major problems with its call centre operation and these are described in detail in the next section. An emergency change of centre, software and communications was undertaken in September 2001 and by this point passengers had fallen by about 20% from their peak. Following this difficult transfer, and intensive additional work funded by the County, the position has recovered to within 5%. The new challenge is thus to fully regain customer confidence and build on this to try out even more innovative services funded by the latest Challenge Grant.

Service Concept and Design

Context

Before conducting this review it is important to remember that the Wigglybus itself was meant to fit within a broader change in rural public transport policy. The proposal was for local authorities to move away from providing a public transport social safety net towards a network which could start to offer a realistic alternative to the car. In taking the car as the benchmark for cost, reliability and quality the social inclusion agenda would be covered at the same time as attracting existing car users. In particular the “forced” ownership of cars, particularly second or third cars, would be addressed for the first time.

The Wigglybus was meant to be only part of this wider reform - but it does provide the answer to making “first step” journeys on rural public transport. These journeys consist both of getting to the longer distance bus, coach and train networks, as well as getting to a local centre for shopping, schools, post office, leisure and social activities, doctor and to visit friends and relatives. Such local centres need the support of public transport if they are to survive.

Thus the project sought to address three key issues for transport:

the social exclusion caused in rural areas for those without a car;

the unsustainable and environmentally damaging patterns of travel in rural areas, especially the faster than average traffic growth; and

the need to support local economic and social activity and regeneration in the countryside.

In order to do so, it took as its premise that people would need a service that matched the car for qualities such as:

- reliability
- security
- access for wheelchairs, buggies and shopping
- vehicle comfort
- reduced waiting times
- information
- low marginal cost.

Service Concept and Design

The basic idea behind the Wigglybus is to serve a wide area with low passenger demand much more frequently than previously thought possible. It achieves this by not going to every settlement within its area on every round but only when requested. It undertakes its rounds once an hour and thus provides an opportunity to travel every hour. This is not the same as guaranteeing a bus to every settlement every hour. If

no request is made, the settlement is not visited. In fact the bus could not serve every settlement on every round - thus actually designed for intermittent and low levels of travel demand.

To make this acceptable to the user, the stops are requested by telephone and passengers know to within a few minutes when the bus is coming. Thus, once the journey is booked, it is guaranteed to a greater extent than would normally be the case. This is achieved by using a Call Centre operation and a GIS/satellite tracking system.

This requires a completely different pattern of behaviour from our passengers - they do not have to look up timetables or wait at isolated bus stops with no means of knowing if the bus is running. On the other hand, they do have to communicate their desire to travel to the call centre and, if the bus is full at the time they want to use it, they have to settle for the next most convenient time. It can, of course, be used more conventionally at its few, defined key stops - especially where it starts its hourly circuit.

One key element in the Wigglybus approach therefore was to communicate with local people about how the service would operate, giving trial tickets, undertaking publicity, organising events and holding meetings. From the start the project had strong local backing and the community work was always integral to the bid. An information line was set up to take pressure off the booking line and undertake day to day tasks.

There were no really suitable vehicles available and thus a new design was required. First they had to be small enough to use rural roads. Secondly they broke new ground in accessibility for their size - low floors and lowering front suspension. Thirdly they set new standards of comfort and ease of use, for example with large seats and air conditioning. Finally they were painted and signed to attract attention and create a welcoming feel, and to create a very visible brand image.

On the cost front the project set up a Travel Club which offers discounts in return for an annual membership. It also provides a further opportunity to communicate with a committed core of regular customers and use them at regular intervals to get valuable feedback. Six monthly meetings are held of the Standing Advisory Group - open to the public and to questions from the floor.

Working with the Community

The Wigglybus project had the benefit of an established local community partner - the Pewsey Vale Transport Appraisal Group (known in the Vale as PVTAG). It is a relatively small group of like-minded local volunteers who have an interest in the development of all types of rural transport. The Group, now four years old, draws its support from the 23 villages and parishes in the Vale, and very slightly outside the normal definition of the Vale. Its contribution has been critical to the success of the project and its role is explored in greater detail later in the review.

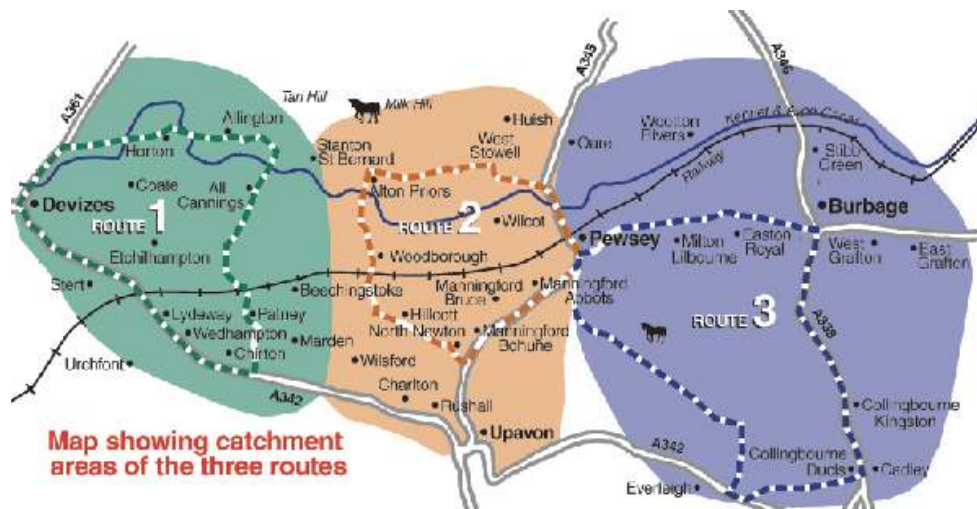
Summary of service provided

The Vale of Pewsey was divided into three zones, each of which was provided with an

approximately hourly daytime service. The three areas are shown on the map below. Each round started at a fixed time from an “anchor point” (one in Pewsey and one in Devizes). There was a core route, but the bus could wiggle away from it. The service was registered as a bus service and received fuel duty rebate for the core route (but not the wiggles). The service was funded mainly by the Government’s Rural Bus Challenge, but with support from Kennet District (£120,000 over 3 years) and Wiltshire (up to £120,000 over 3 years).

The call centre was originally operated by the Wiltshire Ambulance Service as a partner, and now by a commercial call centre (MessageLink). The bus service was fully tendered, run first by Clapton Coaches and now by Hatts Coaches. The current software is supplied by Mobisoft UK.

The Management Group consisted of Wiltshire, Kennet, PVTAG and MTRU, and MessageLink, Mobisoft and Hatts were also members of the Management Group. This basic structure is continuing over the next three years, but with the addition of a local manager employed by Wiltshire.



The service itself has been altered several times during the three years in response to public requests and community research, for example experimenting with direct Pewsey to Devizes links. At the end of the second year evening services were added on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. The next section of this review considers levels of use and journey types in more detail.

Wigglybus users

Overview

With strong community backing and an intensive marketing programme including leaflets and video, the service started well, climbing to around 2,000 passengers a month (75 per day) over the three routes in the first year. In Spring 2000 further publicity and word of mouth (our surveys revealed that this was the most effective means of persuading people to try the bus) encouraged rapid growth to beyond 3,500 users a month (over 140 a day). The full figures are given in Annex 1. The Wigglybus was carrying over 40,000 passengers a year by June 2001.

However, a serious problem developed in the routing software at about this time, followed by problems with the communications system. The call centre operators and drivers worked hard to compensate for this and the communications problem was addressed, but mobile phones had to be used to a huge extent - costing over £700 a month. In fact a major change was planned by the management team for 2002 to upgrade the call centre operation and this was to be part of a Challenge Bid in October 2001.

It became clear that the software problem could not be resolved and that urgent action was required. Unfortunately this had to be taken before the results of the new bid would be known. This was a very difficult decision and the move of a relatively large scale demand responsive service had to be undertaken "live" and with little preparation time. The result was a range of serious problems with the call centre operation - the very heart of the service. Complaints rose from one or two a week to nearly twenty. The Information Line and the community partner had to keep track of these and try to sort them out. It was decided to delay a fares increase and extend all Travel Club memberships by two months as a good will gesture.

Again urgent action was required and a review, funded by Wiltshire County Council outside the Challenge process, revealed several major and a host of minor problems. These ranged from equipment problems to the way the services were transferred into the software. Major and minor modifications were made during late 2001 and early 2002. The results of this review and the actions taken were published in March this year, and work is continuing to refine the system. Complaints have now fallen back to the previous level.

These problems are reflected in the ridership figures, which began to fall in August 2001 and plunged in September. These figures were not available to the management team until November because of the software failure and this has caused problems with the use forecasts submitted in the 2001 Bid which were prepared in September. These are clearly not achievable in the same timescale as predicted. Ridership is now recovering and is back to within 5% of the peak.

Despite this crisis, work has continued on improving the service as well as recovering public confidence and a new service pattern was introduced in May 2002, with a new contact number and procedure for addressing problems. These changes, including a

new Friday evening service, were achieved within the existing operational budget. New operating procedures have also been drafted and published and will continue to be developed.

User surveys

On-bus surveys and travel club surveys were completed in Spring 2000 and 2001. The second survey had problems caused by full buses in the early mornings and these users were surveyed separately by telephone. The planned survey for 2002 was not carried out due to the problems caused by the call centre move, the budget problems and the imminent service changes. However the first two years' results reveal some interesting patterns and changes.

The first point to make is that the level of use grew by 47% between the two surveys. Thus the differences help to show where the growth in passengers use has occurred. These are illustrated in Table 1 below. For example, there appears to have been stronger growth in shopping trips, although the interplay between this category and "leisure" may explain the huge drop in this latter figure. School trips also grew slightly ahead of the average, while work trips stayed constant in absolute numbers but lost overall share.

Also interesting is the contrast between Travel Club members and users overall. Clearly the regular travellers want to take advantage of the discount offered by Travel Club membership, hence the higher proportion of work and school trips. The perhaps more casual visits category is correspondingly lower.

Table 1

Journey purpose: surveys 2000 and 2001

	March 2000 Travel Club	March 2000	March 2001
	%	%	%
Work	39	19	13
School	23	14	15
Shop	17	27	49
Visit	7	17	17
Health	4	0	1
Appointment	1	0	4
Leisure	7	16	2
Catch another service	2	7	0
<i>Number of respondents</i>	218	132	200

There also appear to have been new patterns of mode switching among the new users. This is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Previous method of making journeys 2000 and 2001

	March 2000 Travel Club %	March 2000 %	March 2001 %
No travel	20	26	55
Car lift	46	39	11
Car driver	20	15	7
Other bus	5	7	7
Walk	5	6	14
Bike	1	1	4
Taxi	3	7	3
<i>Number of respondents</i>	182	136	200

The most striking difference here is the increase in completely new journeys. Clearly the results of only two surveys need to be treated with caution, but the inference is that the Wigglybus has enabled a new range of journeys to be undertaken. This appears to be focussed on more frequent shopping trips, with mixed sources. For example, slightly more transfers from walk, bus and cycle seem to have taken place, although this may have been affected by changes to bus routes forcing the transfer.

Conclusions

The initial impact of the service was on existing trips and encouraged major mode switch from car driving and car passengers. This impact appears to have been maintained but the next stage of growth has been from wider sources, possibly including generation through more frequent trip making. This will be a specific area for research in the next survey in Spring 2003.

Costs, tenders and registrations

There are two important elements to be considered in this section of the review. The first is the overall levels of cost and how far these have changed over the 3 years; the second is the important measure of cost per trip. Both of these are considered in relation to the aspirations of the 1999 Bid.

The first key consideration is how to separate out the long term costs from the additional research and monitoring costs of a Challenge project. Fundamentally the ongoing costs of community involvement, publicity and survey work are excluded from the analysis presented here. It is assumed that no special favours are granted to demand responsive schemes, but implicit in this is the need for some general improvement in these areas. In fact the local authorities in the Wigglybus area have benefitted from the experience within the project and used it to move forward, particularly on community involvement. Monitoring is still a problem although not for the Wigglybus directly which is probably more studied and surveyed than any other Wiltshire bus service. The difficulty is finding comparable data for other bus services to compare it to!

Thus the long term costs which are known are bus operating costs and call centre costs. The capital cost of the buses is difficult to calculate since they have only been running for three years. An assumption has been made to produce figures for support per trip made with and without the capital costs. Income estimates include normal fares, concessionary fares, statutory travel, travel club membership and fares and fuel duty rebate and amount to about £64,000 per year in years 2 and 3.

In allocating costs, revenues and support per trip, the global figures for Wigglybus as a whole are not particularly useful. A good example is the evening service, where the service started much later the others, was less than hoped due to high costs, and started in a low demand period. There is also a significant difference between Saturday use and weekday use, and a further difference between market days and other days.

Best estimates of the costs and support levels are therefore given for different services in Tables 3 to 6 below. The figures in brackets include the estimated capital costs.

Table 3
Daytime services excluding Saturday

<i>Costs in £,000</i>	Bus operation	Call Centre	Subsidy per trip
Year 1	104	22.5	£5.25 (£6.36)
Year 2	148	23.3	£2.74 (£3.31)
Year 3	153	22.5	£2.91 (£3.52)

Table 4
Saturday services

<i>Costs in £,000</i>	Bus operation	Call Centre	Subsidy per trip
Year 1	20.8	4.5	£13.12 (£14.45)
Year 2	29.5	4.7	£9.31 (£10.05)
Year 3	30.7	4.5	£10.15 (£10.94)

Table 5
Evening services

<i>Costs in £,000</i>	Bus operation	Call Centre	Subsidy per trip
Bid estimate	19	0	
Year 2	28	0	£13.50
Year 3	30	0	£ 9.00

Table 6
All daytime services: actual

<i>Costs in £,000</i>	Bus operation	Call Centre	Subsidy per trip
Bid estimate	105	30	
Year 1	125	27	£5.90 (£7.22)
Year 2	177	28	£3.23 (£3.91)
Year 3	184	27	£3.50 (£4.22)

Notes: income used to calculate subsidy includes fuel duty rebate, fares, club membership and statutory travel.

What is immediately apparent is the serious impact of the rise in bus operating cost. This is further illustrated in Table 7, which seeks to show support levels if the rises had been more modest. On the other hand, call centre costs have been kept under control. The support per trip is in fact more dependent on levels of use rather than income. Viewed another way, support per head of population is still modest - in this case about £15 per person per year. Again this is related to the actual tendered costs. There is also the implication that the Wigglybus contract has been financially very rewarding to the operators (see Table 8), although to be fair they have needed to put in extra resources themselves, especially in years two and three. Examples of this are acting to counteract poor vehicle reliability and participating in the project management. Neither of these

should be long term problems. Thus the key issue is whether these factors, and the acquired knowledge and familiarity with what was originally a cutting-edge project, will result in a reduced cost from the next round of tenders at the end of this year, coming into effect in March 2003.

Table 7

All services: if bus costs rose at industry average (actual in brackets)

	Bus operation	Call Centre	Subsidy per trip
Bid estimate	105	30	
Year 1	125	27	£7.22 (Base)
Year 2	140	28	£3.05 (£3.91)
Year 3	147	27	£3.38 (£4.22)

Note: the average cost increase is based on wages and fuel and used to calculate the annual inflation increases which are built in to bus contracts with local authorities.

Given the impact on predicted support, the project has used some additional data relating to operator costs from the first operator, enabling at least a general analysis of costs and profits. It should be noted that there are several reasons for these costs needing to allow for special Wigglybus concerns by the operator, and these are explored later in this Chapter.

Table 8

Analysis of operator's cost and income

	Drivers' wages & NI	Fuel	Exceptional maintenance	Spare bus, normal service, admin, profit	
Year 1	74	26	0	25	20%
Year 2	78	26	12	61	34%
Year 3	82	26	16	60	33%

In view of this apparently significant difference between costs and income the possibility of alternatives to the current system of tendering are considered in the following section.

Tendering

Like all UK public bus services the cost of operating the Wigglybus depends on private sector operators. Services must usually be put out to tender and operators can choose how much to charge or whether to tender at all. In some areas, particularly larger urban

centres, there may be a significant number of bidders, increasing competition, or an established operator who has a public service ethos, working on a low profit margin. These were often municipal operators forced into the private sector by the 1985 deregulation. In many rural areas the range of bidders and the lack of urban scale operations often means that competition is low and prices (and profits) are high. On the other hand, rural operations do have fewer economies of scale.

In addition there is a problem that in many instances contracts were being run at too low a cost, corners were cut, staff were underpaid and quality and reliability were suffering. There is a view that at least part of the contract price increase is a once and for all “catch up” to more realistic levels and that rises will level off.

Overall it will be crucial to track the rises closely, see if they do stabilise, and to identify the precise reasons (or mix of reasons) which have caused them.

In relation to the Wigglybus, the mid term review drew attention to this problem, quoting the ATCO figures for bus tender inflation of about 20% on a like by like contract basis. Individual examples are much higher, with the Wigglybus experiencing a 50% rise in nine months (see above). The County has had to put £50,000 a year into supporting Wigglybus to make up part of the cost increase for the last two years. The project also implemented a package of economies in the marketing and highway infrastructure budgets.

Expanding the market

It is clear that there are several ways of addressing this problem.

The first is to stimulate new operators, perhaps with a public service ethos, to come into the market. One obvious route for this, already used with some success, is to help community transport companies broaden out into regular service provision. Devon is a good example. This is a promising avenue but needs support from local and central government, both in terms of developing new organisational skills and in understanding the change in level of responsibility involved in moving from community provision to regular services. Unfortunately not every area has a community transport organisation at all, let alone one willing to expand its activities.

Working with other community representatives in the voluntary sector to create a company to undertake such provision is a further possibility. However, this is a much more daunting task. Many people who are willing to give some of their time to advise and support transport initiatives in their local area are not necessarily willing to move into the area of service provision. In this they are right to be wary of the considerable technical, legal and employment responsibilities which they would have to take on. It may be that an external organisation or local authority could provide a lead, but this is complicated by the legal framework. A local authority, for example, could not be part of a company that is bidding as well as judging the tenders from competitors. However the “not for profit” company option may well be possible with the community partner in a supporting role - it is clear that this would be of interest to PVTAG.

In the case of the Wigglybus, when the first provider withdrew, a new company was sponsored by a local and very experienced recently retired bus operator and the project manager from MTRU. This company submitted a tender which was in fact the lowest. Despite MTRU having excluded itself from any discussions on tendering as soon as this idea was devised, another bus company threatened legal action against the County if the contract was awarded to the company including the project manager. This created an extremely difficult position for the County, particularly because a legal wrangle could have interrupted the service. The next lowest tender was therefore accepted, even though it was significantly higher.

However, a new venture from interested parties is again not a universal solution. This points to another possibility - direct local authority provision. Apart from going entirely against the trend towards "outsourcing" there would be severe legal difficulties and competition issues. In addition, local authorities would have to develop their expertise in a parallel way to community transport operators. The issue of long term commitment in the light of political change would also have to be resolved. However, the use of joint ventures might be a possible way forward. It would fit with the next possibility considered under contracts.

Changing the contract

Another alternative would be to look at the way tendering is undertaken. At the moment tenderers have to assess their risks as well as the more predictable costs of operation. In the case of demand responsive services operators may perceive a high risk and a higher than usual management overhead. The risk can be addressed, and to an extent the purchase of the vehicles by the Wigglybus project was designed to lower this. More management time is involved, but again this can be controlled by clearly defining the work of the project manager in such innovative services. Again this was the case with the Wigglybus.

These factors did not, however, prevent the severe cost rise experienced in 2000. The next round of tendering needs to explore what can be done to limit perceived risk and address the issue of management time and profit. One way would be to propose contracts which share both risk and profit. This would work by asking for a tender to set out a "best estimate" bid showing costs and profit margin. This part of the contract would have to remain strictly confidential until a contract were awarded. If costs rose unexpectedly, the local authority could pay half an audited increase. If costs were less than predicted, the operator would pay over half the extra profit. Revenue could also be shared, giving both parties an interest in improving income, although this might make concessionary schemes and discounts (such as the Wigglybus Travel Club) more difficult. It remains true for the Wigglybus, however, that while ridership is good, revenue has been slightly less than expected.

This example is only one way in which new partnerships could be formed - variations on these basic themes are clearly possible. It will be interesting to see if any emerge as more demand responsive schemes are tendered.

The rural bus cost inflation spiral

The rise in cost for the Wigglybus contract has not, however, occurred in isolation. As other contracts have come up for renewal, the lack of competition and a genuine desire to achieve quality have led to higher costs. In normal circumstances this might have led to a gradual increase as contracts were renewed. Three factors have accelerated this effect.

The first is that the increase in demand for services, through the Government's increase in funding, has itself created an excess of demand over supply. New services were put out to tender and these were subject to higher bids.

However, this effect was exaggerated because operators realised that they could maximise profits by bidding for contracts at the new higher market rate even if they did not have the drivers and vehicles to run them. If they were successful, they simply gave notice on the least profitable contract they were then running in order to take up the more profitable one. The local authority then had to re-tender that service, which usually came in at a higher price.

The final boost to price inflation has been the way in which the subsidised sector interacts with commercial services. If operators could make more money from a subsidised service than running one of their commercial service, it makes business sense to drop it. If an operator found they were successful in winning profitable tenders they could cut their least profitable commercial routes. The local authority would then have to decide whether or not to support them, and if they did, the new market rates applied.

For these reasons the price acceleration has been faster than the normal turnover of contracts would have produced, and has continued. It will only slow down when supply is better balanced with demand and this may be some way off. This will require more vehicles and more drivers, and at least part of the rise in operator cost is due to this new investment.

However there is one final problem which threatens even this possibility of more stable costs. Some bus companies are now in fact large scale transport businesses. They do not consider simply whether a bus service makes a profit or not. They want to find the highest profit level per unit cost - the essence of maximising profits. This leads to a new situation where operators seek to concentrate on their best performing services - sometimes referred to as "concentrating on the core network".

The effect of this is that investment will flow to where it makes most money and away from less profitable routes. If these are then cut, local authorities will be faced with a new dilemma - should they subsidise these services? If they do, it is likely that they will cost the local authorities more than the revenue they receive, even though they made a profit when run privately. The reason is simple - when the service is tendered, bus companies will bid at a level at which their profit margin is similar to that on their "core" network. The totality of bus provision will cost the public more and the main product will be a more profitable bus industry. What is unfortunately more likely is that available support will not be able to keep up with demand and instead of service increases, cuts will be firmly back on the agenda.

While it is difficult to obtain detailed local statistics, Government does provide data for English Shire Counties as a group up to the year April 1999 to March 2000. The analysis of these figures given in Table 9 indicates the problem. While there was a significant rise in support in 1998/99 (28%), there was a less marked rise in bus kilometres (11%). The following year saw another significant rise (12%) but service levels actually fell slightly (by 4%).

Table 9
English Shire Counties
Bus service level (bus kilometres) and county support 1997/98 to 1999/00

	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00
Bus kilometres	186mn	206mn (+11%)	197mn (-4%)
Revenue support	£86mn	£110mn (+28%)	£123mn (+12%)

Of course there will be benefits from more profitable bus operators. If drivers are better paid, the workforce will be more stable and give better service. If vehicles are better maintained and more modern, they will be of higher quality and more reliable. But from the most rural district to the centre of London, operator charges are rising fast and in many areas rising with little or no rise in passenger use. The implications for local authorities are serious, but for central Government potentially more so. The Wigglybus mid-term review highlighted this growing problem and it remains a major threat to meeting 10 year plan targets, especially for rural bus accessibility and use.

Addressing cost issues

While it is true that cost increases may not be so serious everywhere, they are an issue in many rural areas and especially so for demand responsive services. At the moment there is no clear line of responsibility for addressing this problem. Local government faces too many legal, financial and technical restrictions. Central government is still working within the 1985 Transport Act which enshrines a “hands off” attitude. The point here is that Government will either have to face further significant increases in grant or pull back from its commitment to achieve progress in rural areas, unless it is willing to become involved or give local authorities the power to create change.

Given that the private sector is now the major player in service provision and has been so for some time the key way forward is to get the issue into the open and discuss it with the operators. New forms of contract, not just of the type sketched out earlier in this document need to be explored and then implemented. Open book accounting of the type which may be needed is common in the more partnership based approaches found, for example, in the airline industry. The problem is mixing the private sector, which still runs the great majority of bus services, with an overall plan for a bus network with social and environmental objectives. This need not be insurmountable, but needs to be addressed if the progress which has been made, particularly with new types of service through the

Challenge Fund, is not to be wasted. Moving innovative schemes into the mainstream will be very difficult if other services are being withdrawn because of the cost pressures described above.

Registration and fuel duty rebate

As this review is being completed, the Government is consulting on a new approach to registration (“The Flexible Future”) and bus subsidy in general. The Wigglybus is given as an example of how a service can be registered normally although it incorporates a high degree of flexibility. However, it is very likely that the Wigglybus would benefit from being allowed greater flexibility, particularly in its biggest area (Pewsey 3). The Wigglybus management team will respond to the consultation separately but the ideas within it are welcome in as far as they will support greater flexibility, and have been pressed for since the early days of the project when registration first became an issue.

As regards fuel duty rebate (**FDR** now renamed BSOG) it seems anachronistic that the core route is eligible and the “wiggles” are not. The experience of the Wigglybus would support removing this anomaly as part of the changes which are intended following the consultation. However, it may be that the reforms would remove FDR and replace it with a new form of revenue support. The critical issue is that any change should recognise the additional mileage that is travelled in rural areas (which FDR does, although in a rather crude way) and the lower levels of use due to dispersed population. It also important to remember that “rural areas” are incredibly different in nature and that rigid service patterns or solutions are unlikely to be successful.

In assessing how any support is targeted it will be critical to understand the different objectives, in particular the twin track approach of creating greater inclusion in rural society and in reducing car use. These should not be mutually exclusive, as the Wigglybus has shown, but there are potential pitfalls. For example, the former may emphasise accessibility at the expense of frequency or speed, the latter implies a level of vehicle and service quality which is expensive and needs more users to justify. Overall the Government’s desire to see rural people have reasonable access to at least hourly services can only be met at a sustainable cost by using demand responsive services. These may need more and possibly different types of support.

Management

The County has financial responsibility for the project, and enters into, and enforces, all the sub-contracts for operating the buses, call centre and control technology. Wiltshire Ambulance Service first had a contract to run the call centre, now taken over by MessageLink. The original software failed last year and has been replaced with Mobirouter. The buses were originally operated by Claptons Coaches and are now operated by Hatts Coaches. Both are local companies. However, much of the work, for example service development, was in fact undertaken by the project managers, MTRU transport consultants. The title "manager" is misleading since the role is essentially one of co-ordinating all the organisations working together in a loose alliance - there is no formal partnership agreement. This is done through regular meetings of a management group, including the bus and call centre operators, community partner, District and County. It is convened and chaired by the project manager.

The project manager had no independent executive power, but had a contract covering tasks such as monitoring, publicity and the Travel Club. PVTAG have their own budget within the bid that is claimed from Wiltshire directly or via MTRU. This slightly complex structure worked through the good will of the participants and was set out in diagrammatic form for an earlier public meeting and the Newsletter.

At the beginning of the project this structure was difficult because of the multiple managerial responsibilities and required major co-ordination, especially as the partners got to understand each other better in the new context. When the decision was made not to create a formal partnership agreement, it was decided to increase public accountability by holding meetings every six months. The public were invited and all the management team answered questions. A group of advisers, including community, travel club and council members were also present to ask their own questions and contribute views.

This has worked out to be a very constructive discipline for the management group, as well as a chance for the public to put their points and receive an answer direct. The community partner, PVTAG, takes the lead in organising and minuting events. Despite the resource cost, this has become an important feature of the Wigglybus service.

Growing trust and common purpose in a partnership is always a key to success and this developed over the three years. There have been many beneficial side effects as networks are created between local authorities and community interests. However, it would be wrong to say that the management structure was without its problems.

The first is that there were probably too many managerial influences and a lack of overall responsibility. During the initial phase the project manager was clearly undertaking the lead in pushing forward and the title was probably accurate. Once operational contracts were in place this became blurred and could only be a co-ordination role. Executive authority was with the County, but they in turn had little day to day control over the call centre and bus operations. Their problems were exacerbated by the fact that the project desperately needed stability while it established the new type of service with the public. Enforcing contracts was time consuming, difficult and risky. The disruption caused by the call centre move in 2001 illustrates the point.

Thus the members of the management team had to build on a more consensual way of working and this was encouraged by including the providers (call centre and bus operator) on the management group from the start. Nevertheless, the implementation of decisions usually depends on several organisations and clearly requires more local monitoring. To this end, the 2001 Challenge Bid included a local management function, paying for part of a new public transport development post at Wiltshire County Council with a third of its time allocated to the Wigglybus. This means that the original project manager has reduced their role to the specific tasks such as monitoring and act as a member of the management team but in an advisory capacity.

There remains the issue of how bus operations or the call centre are managed by the operators and how they are effectively integrated (at least from the passenger's point of view). The software is another factor which needs to be understood and included in the equation. At one stage, when the original call centre software began to collapse, the drivers and call centre worked together to continue the service, with a low level of management involvement from their own organisations. Thus this was not immediately clear to the overall Wigglybus management group, and even when it was, took a great deal of time to sort out. Again this reflects on the structure of contracts and the problems of enforcement. However, it is also true that the efforts to resolve these problems were discussed openly and frankly at the management meetings. Direct meetings between the project manager and front line staff were also held. The appointment of the local manager was designed to address these difficulties and allow a much greater degree of local monitoring and involvement in the operation of the service.

Community

Partnership and Diversity

The community involvement in the Wigglybus has many forms. The clearest is the involvement of the Pewsey Vale Transport Appraisal Group (**PVTAG**) on the management group. Further details of the PVTAG contribution are set out below. Other avenues are through the six monthly public meetings, Travel Club, Freepost and the Information Line. Procedures for dealing with suggestions and complaints used to be rather dispersed and a new procedure has been introduced with a freephone number at the County.

The value of the community to the service should not be underestimated. Leaving aside the principles of involving local people in the decisions which affect them, the practical value is immense. Local knowledge of people's travel patterns was critical in devising the Wigglybus routes, running the trial service simply would not have been possible without the thirty or so volunteers and word of mouth is always the best advertising. Our community partner's members have given talks to local meetings, distributed leaflets and videos and helped with events and stalls to publicise not only Wigglybus, but its connections to rail and other bus services. They have also undertaken a customer care role, but independently, representing individuals as well as explaining the new service to them, and, sometimes, why it went wrong.

Involving the community should not, however, be seen as a cheap way of getting leaflets distributed. In fact it requires an acceptance that time will be needed to develop new relationships, and that the members of any community body are also likely to change, as is their ability to give up their own time. Some form of help in developing the group may be needed, but this must not impose a prescribed format or indeed try to build the group into something it does not want to be. "Capacity building" can be helpful, but needs to be community led. There is perhaps over-optimism that such bodies can act in a very formal way - they are not public corporations and will have their own internal disagreements, variations in how much time individuals can commit and the group's "representativeness" may even be challenged.

This illustrates the need for realism - no community group is truly representative in the sense of an elected body. The strengths are that it is separate from this process and complements it. The issue is widening and deepening local people's involvement and a community partner can fulfil a major role.

The local value of involvement must be seen by those participating as direct and having real impact. If a local group becomes bogged down in its own administration or its constitution, active participants will become hard to find. For this reason PVTAG has used a modest part of its budget for specific tasks at peak times, while continuing its own activities in the community marketing field. This has proved a very successful compromise for them and allowed them to focus on what they do best.

A final point to be made is that there are valuable, but different, roles for the different local and national interest groups which may reside (or pass through) the community

umbrella. Residents' groups may have a different agenda from those seeking environmental improvement or conservation. Nationally or regionally based organisations have a different agenda from those at the parish pump. This melee does not make such involvement plain sailing, but the finding of common purpose is in itself a strengthening of the local community - if it can be achieved. The judgement for the Wigglybus is that this continuing process has been a tremendous benefit overall, although it would be wrong to deny that there have been some extremely difficult and sometimes unexpected disagreements internally and externally.

The best test of the process is that public and private discussions are almost always frank and robust and that so far these have concluded with an agreed series of actions which can then be implemented and monitored.

PVTAG - the Wigglybus Community Partner

The Pewsey Vale Transport Appraisal Group (known locally in the Vale as 'PVTAG') is a relatively small group of like-minded local volunteers who have an interest in the development of all types of rural public transport. The Group, now five years old, draws its support mainly from 27 villages and parishes throughout the length and breadth of the Vale, and very slightly outside the normal definition of the Vale.

The details how the Wigglybus project became a reality are given in the Mid Term Review published in December 2000, and this report seeks to describe only the principal events after the service was launched formally in June 1999. However, the following two issues are considered sufficiently germane to this report to repeat at this stage.

Firstly, as part of the research into the viability of the 'wiggling bus' concept, a 'trial day' was organised utilising a borrowed community bus, mobile phones, and a number of willing (if slightly bemused) local volunteers as guinea pigs. The day went rather well, and it was quite obvious that, with some modifications, the concept of a "wiggly bus" could work well. It also underlined the desperate need to provide some means of alleviating the widespread social exclusion experienced by many people in the scattered communities in the Vale.

Secondly, at the time that a formal bid to the RBCF was submitted by WCC, PVTAG had promoted the idea of having a formal partnership with both County and District, and proposed a model that had been used with some success between Allied Dunbar and Swindon BC. However, WCC's legal advisers considered that this was not appropriate in the circumstances and, in spite of much soul searching, the idea was eventually dropped.

This meant that the community was not as formally represented as had been envisaged, even though PVTAG was a full and active member of the Project Management Group that would oversee the day to day operational running of the new service. However, another innovative idea was put forward in the shape of a 'Standing Advisory Group' that would be responsible for ensuring that the Management Group delivered a service that reflected the profile described in the Bid

to the RBCF. PVTAG has continued to play a key role in the organisation and conduct of the SAG meetings.

Whereas the Management Group comprised at least one officer from both county and district and a PVTAG member, and latterly a senior management representative from both the contractors (namely Wiltshire Ambulance Service as the call centre operator and Claptons Coaches as the bus operator), the Standing Advisory Group (better known as the 'SAG') would have a much broader membership. It was decided that in addition to a senior officer and an elected member from both county and district, there should be two members from the Travel Club, a member from PVTAG, and a member from Voluntary Action Kennet (VAK – known formerly as Kennet Rural Development Agency). In this way it was felt that the community representation would be adequately met. Arguably the most potent result of the formation of the SAG was that the Chair was vested in PVTAG, and that a six-monthly public meeting was held at which a significant audience of bus users are able to ask (searching!) questions of both the SAG itself and the Management Group. These public meetings became a prime source of community feedback for existing services, and provided much of the basis for development of the service.

In the Bid, PVTAG was given the direct role of providing the community marketing and outreach functions. Clearly, some of these elements were outside the resources (but not necessarily beyond the skill levels) of the Group, and much of this work was sub-contracted to VAK on a one-day-a-week basis. VAK was ideally suited to this task as it is both rooted in the communities and has both the resources and the skills to implement the work. There is also much synergy between PVTAG's wider interests and those of the Wigglybus services, and the arrangement was comfortable and effective.

PVTAG's marketing and community market research extend beyond the requirements of Wigglybus. The group carries out its own research projects, albeit making the results available to Wigglybus, the local Quiet Lanes project, the Pewsey Forum, and any other organisation that may benefit from them. Whilst any marketing or research for Wigglybus is adequately funded within the Wigglybus budget, it is a sad fact that virtually no other sources of regular funding are available to such groups as PVTAG. All other non-Wigglybus activity has to be funded on an ad hoc basis, and such activities depend very much on the generosity of local councils and organisations such as the Wiltshire Rural Transport Partnership and Travelwise.

PVTAG also has an implied role, equally important as its marketing activities. That role is to represent the communities' hopes and fears and needs with regard to the Wigglybus service. PVTAG members all live in the community, and all have interests in other groups (e.g. WI, handicapped organisations, the church, train users), and the intelligence gathered at grass roots has proved to be of inestimable benefit to the Wigglybus service. With such diverse partners as the county and district councils and the community it would be naïve to suppose that there were not a number of very different, and sometimes conflicting, agendas. PVTAG is very aware that its own agenda is to represent the views of the community, and to achieve the optimum compromise on behalf of the bus users. Whilst this has always been a key role since the inception of the Wigglybus service, it is likely to become even more critical as the

project moves out of its first three years of pilot phase, and matures into an established service in the medium and longer terms.

PVTAG relishes its role in the Wigglybus service, and seeks to provide a more commercially oriented input regarding marketing, brand identity and process discipline culled from its members who work in the broader commercial world.

Conclusions and Key Issues

Conclusions

Overall it is clear that the Wigglybus has proved several important new dicta for rural services:

- 1 The technology of demand responsive systems can work
- 2 Passengers can move to a new system of booking rather than waiting at stops
- 3 Passengers can be attracted in reasonable numbers and a reasonable proportion will be former car users
- 4 Costs exceed income but it is possible to provide a door to door service at a cost comparable to a conventional "big bus" approach
- 5 Marketing and community involvement need to be closely integrated
- 6 Community partners can take a special and beneficial role in developing rural services
- 7 Social inclusion objectives can be successfully combined with diverting journeys from car to more sustainable modes
- 8 Despite the use of technology, the human contacts (drivers, call centre operators, travel club, public meetings) remain critical.

Key issues

Having reached these general conclusions, it is important to consider how the Wigglybus, and other such services, could be developed in the future. To do this several key issues which will need to be addressed are set out below.

1. Is there a ceiling to passenger growth, and what levels of use can be achieved in a rural area?
2. What are the key determinants to passenger use in the many different types of rural area?
3. How will patterns of use develop, especially the balance between social needs and modal switch, and how can former car users be retained?
4. What are the social inclusion and environmental benefits of giving an hourly (as opposed to less frequent) service? Will society be prepared to pay for these?
5. How far can costs be reduced without harming quality/ attractiveness of

service, and will this give a net cost per passenger that is acceptable?

6. What is the public perception of benefits / disadvantages of DRT versus conventional bus in different circumstances?
7. What are the deterrents to use (for example the need to book, variable journey time and possibly circuitous journeys)?
8. Is the technology foolproof, especially issues around reliable communications?
9. How can economies of scale in call centre costs (to reduce cost / call) be balanced with the need for a user friendly service?
10. Can tender costs be brought under control?

Annex 1

Wigglybus usage 1999 to 2002

Wigglybus Passengers per day

