Trends in the use of UK Dial-a-ride services

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Introduction

Dial-a-rides have been providing door to door transport for disabled passengers in much of Britain since the 1980s. Often with roots in the voluntary sector, they aimed to provide 'parallel public transport' for disabled people who could not use conventional bus services. While they have now become integrated into the fabric of transport provision in many urban areas, there have in recent times been anecdotal suggestions that their use is in decline and some services have ceased entirely (Hull Daily Mail 2014) Despite this, data about the actual patterns of use of dial-a-ride services overall is surprisingly hard to obtain. This paper reports on research carried out in an attempt to partially fill that evidence gap as part of a strategy development exercise for Edinburgh-based dial-a-ride service HcL (Handicabs)*. The research identifies trends in the usage of ten dial-a-ride services in the UK and goes on to consider possible causes of the trends identified and the potential implications for those managing and funding them.

The term 'dial-a-ride' can cover a wide variety of service design. In particular, many so-called dial-a-rides operate semi-scheduled shopping services to a common destination, rather than a 'many to many' service. Some services (eg Strathclyde Mybus) pick passengers up from the kerbside, while a few (eg HcL) offer a 'through-the-door' service offering enhanced passenger assistance. Some charge a fare, others are free. Some allow trips to hospitals, while others don't, and operating hours vary considerably. Many have operating areas which are quite restricted, so that short local trips are encouraged, but others offer travel (subject to availability) over a wide area.

All these variables pose a significant problem in comparing like with like. However, the focus here is on identifying longitudinal information on passenger usage by each service, rather than comparison between them, in order to establish longer term internal trends on the pattern of use. The aim was therefore to collate data for a period in the region of five to ten years. Unfortunately, there is no single source of data on UK dial-a-rides, and as a result, it is difficult to obtain directly comparable data over the same time periods for different services. The selection of services described here is therefore dictated not only by conformity with the definition set out below, but also by the availability of data. The data was collected principally from online performance reports published by transport authorities and operators, but has been supplemented by Freedom of Information requests where there were data gaps that appeared to be significant.

Outside the big metropolitan cities and areas, dial-a-rides are often delivered as part of a mix of 'community transport' services, alongside other services such as group minibus hire, driver training and shopmobility schemes. These wider community transport services are not the subject of this paper, which focuses on dial-a-ride services in major metropolitan areas. The criteria for inclusion in this study can therefore be summarised as "door to door services focussing on individual transport needs in UK urban areas".

Data is available for different time periods for different services. While there is only three years' data for some services (Eastleigh, Fife, South Yorkshire) for others, there is data for around a decade. For all services, data is presented up to the end of the 2013/14 year.

* HcL's permission to publish this information is gratefully acknowledged

Findings

The findings from the research is shown in the table below. This shows that there were falls in the use of 8 out of the 10 services. The biggest fall was in the West Midlands where ridership fell from around 2 million trips in 2006 to 1.25 million trips in 2014. In Greater Manchester, ridership fell from 1.22 million in 2007 to 0.85 million in 2014. The two services to buck this trend of falling ridership were Strathclyde (36.5% increase over 8 years) and London (7.5% increase over 9 years)

Dial-a-Ride total passenger trips

Year ending:	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
London		1,260,779	1,231,413	1,172,938	1,127,607	1,199,492	1,254,746	1,345,152	1,375,879	1,352,076	1,355,580
W Midlands			*2,000,000*			1,841,956	1,784,813	1,733,805	1,499,729	1,376,415	1,248,408
Manchester				1,224,157	1,163,913	1,149,889	1,087,971	1,067,158	974,836	882,029	847,000
Strathclyde			399,932	417,427	428,018	442,677	435,396	446,439	480,907	535,044	*546,000*
S Yorkshire									331,842	306,867	331,112
Fife									117,592	114,135	*112,000*
Lothians	119,935	119,591	118,823	116,141	112,226	109,576	106,445	98,842	101,521	100,020	97,832
Merseyside								91,332	94,413	101,779	78,874
Eastleigh		*18,000*			*21,000*				22,319	20,491	19,763
Leicester							12,957	13,080	12,469	11,762	10,843
totals	119,935	1,398,370	3,750,168	2,930,663	2,852,764	4,743,590	4,682,328	4,795,808	5,011,507	4,800,618	4,647,412
	(italics = estimated/approximate figure)										

To summarise the trend information across all ten services, the following chart shows that the average annual change across all ten services is a decline of 2.4%.

	number of years data available	average annual change
Strathclyde	9	+4.2
London	10	+0.8
South Yorkshire	3	-0.1
Lothian	11	-1.8
Fife	3	-2.4
Leicester	5	-4.1
Greater Manchester	8	-4.4
Merseyside	4	-4.5
Eastleigh	3	-5.7
West Midlands	6	-6.4
AVERAGE	-	-2.4

Possible reasons for changing use

While the data suggests that there is a real long term downward trend in Dial-a-ride usage, the reasons for this pattern have not been investigated and can therefore really only be speculated. However, there appear to be three main variables which are likely to affect ridership: funding levels, operating policies and demand.

With regard to funding levels, there is clearly a degree of correlation between the amount of resources put into a service, and the number of trips which it can deliver. If a service experiences reduced funding, it is likely that it will be able to provide fewer trips. Conversely, an expansion of funding may enable increased levels of provision and ridership. Although data on funding levels is not available for most of the services described here, this simple input-output correlation can go some way to explain usage trends. For example, while ridership in London increased by 8% from 2009/10 to 2013/14, funding for the service increased by 11% over the same period (FoI request). It is possible (or perhaps, likely) that funding levels for most of the other dial-a-rides have fallen over the periods examined here; certainly there are examples where funding has been cut (West Midlands, 2011). A decline in funding levels may therefore account for some decline in usage.

The second key variable which may account for changes in usage is operating policy. By this I mean factors such as how much choice passengers have over where and when they can travel; the extent to which clubs and groups are targeted; and the degree of passengers' mobility impairments. For example, it should be possible for a dial-a-ride to increase trip numbers by limiting the operating area and targeting relatively mobile passengers traveling together to social clubs. On the other hand, policies to increase the choice of destination available to passengers, to focus on individual travel needs or on people who need higher levels of assistance would all be likely to reduce the number of trips that the service can offer with the same level of resources. It is

possible that some of the changes in ridership over time identified here may be due to such changes in operating policy, although these have not been explored.

The third factor is passenger demand. Is the demand for Dial-a-ride services falling? Privately, a number of dial-a-ride operators I have spoken to have said that they have recognised a trend of falling demand for some time. One suggestion is that younger disabled people, who a generation ago may have looked to dial-a-ride as a first option to meet their mobility needs, are now less inclined to do so. This could be because of various factors including the improved access to public transport (especially low floor buses in urban Britain) and increased access to private cars. As one indicator of this, the Motability scheme (which assists disabled people to finance car ownership) has grown very significantly over the past 30 years. Figure 1 below shows the growth of the scheme among claimants of Higher Rate of the Mobility Component of the Disability Living Allowance (Oxford Economics 2010). This trend has continued; according to its 2014 Annual Report, Motability had 635,700 members in March 2014.

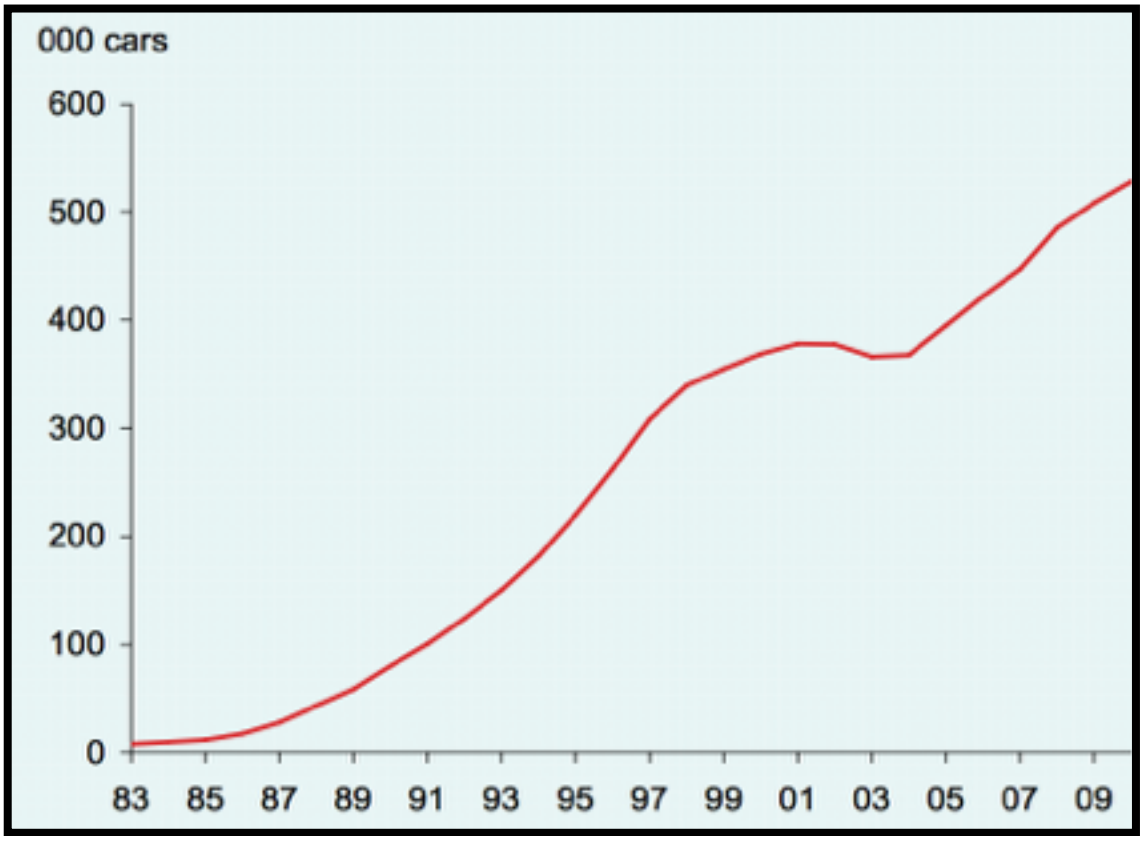

Figure 1: Growth of Motability Scheme (HRMCDLA)
(Oxford Economics, (2010) T*he Social and Economic Impact of the Motability Car Scheme)*

Possibly too, there may be declining appeal (again, especially in younger people) in 'special' or charitable services, particularly if they are seen as old-fashioned (e.g. in terms of branding, vehicle and equipment, on-line presence, etc). At the same time, some older people are remaining fitter longer and therefore may be able to stay using the bus longer, while a significant proportion of older 'silver travellers' may have sufficient income to use taxis more frequently. The rise in home delivery and internet shopping may also be a factor, while the West Midlands passenger transport authority cited "reasons for [the decline in trips] as the closure of traditional forms of entertainment venues and clubs for older and disabled people in the area" (CENTRO, 2014).

Against possible reasons why demand for dial-a-ride might be in decline, clearly there are also factors working to expand the potential dial-a-ride market. Most obviously, the well known demographic trend of not only an ageing population, but especially the numbers of the 'very old' might be expected to increase the potential dial-a-ride user pool. Other factors that might be expected to drive up potential demand for dial-a-ride include continuing policy emphasis on independent living within the community, cuts in local bus service provision and increases in poverty associated with the 'austerity era', making private cars or taxi fares less affordable. In 2013, Strathclyde suggested four factors accounting for growth in Mybus (SPT, 2013):

- re-branding of the service in 2010, designed in part to heighten awareness of the service, especially amongst younger disabled,
- active promotion of the service to groups such as sheltered housing residents and lunch clubs;
- the contraction of commercially-provided bus services in both rural and urban areas; and
- demographic change, with the number of elderly forecast to increase.

There are therefore likely to be a number of currents within the overall trend, some heading upwards and other downward. There may be some segments of dial-a-ride users who have a growing need for the service, and other segments with a declining need. A deeper understanding of changing user needs and wishes amongst these segments is required in order to understand what is really going on. Nevertheless, given that the pattern of falling ridership demonstrated here appears to be both consistent and widespread, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that falling demand is likely to be a significant factor in the observed trends.

Responses to falling passenger numbers

Those responsible for dial-a-ride services have adopted a number of strategies in response to falling usage. In the West Midlands, the transport authority strategically reviewed its accessible transport approach in 2014 through a new 'Prospectus for Accessible Transport' with less emphasis on (and funding for) Ring and Ride. Resources are invested in a package of new services such as a semi-scheduled (but not door to door) 'Flexi-link' bus service, and a 'Mobility Assist' programme to support and train people to use conventional buses. One effect of the reduced funding for Ring and Ride was the ending of Sunday services from April 2014 (partially re-introduced in April 2015), and it is therefore likely that ridership could significantly fall further. Even so, the patronage of service remains significant at well over a million journeys each year.

By contrast in Manchester, the approach appears to have been to have been to introduce a number of measures aimed at improving efficiency and effectiveness, as a result of a 'Flexible Transport Review' carried out in 2010 (for example, reduction of operational depots, new scheduling software, and a 'fixed mileage' system allowing passengers to travel 6 miles in any direction, with an exception policy for requests for longer trips). The transport authority believes that these measures will result in an increase in passenger ridership for 2014-15 of 75,000, reversing the downward trend of recent years (Transport for Greater Manchester, March 2014).

In the Lothians, HcL which has operated dial-a-ride services since 1982, has adopted a new proactive strategy *Opening Doors* aimed at meeting unmet demand for mobility not only through dial-a-ride and semi-scheduled shopping operations but also through a more diverse range of services including potentially Section 22 public bus routes, PSV operations and travel buddy services (HcL 2015).

Conclusions

The most obvious conclusion arising from the data presented in this paper is that further work is required to understand the reasons for the changing pattern in use. To what extent is declining use of dial-a-ride services attributable to reducing demand? What are the reasons for reducing demand? What are the currents and trends within the usage totals? How do we account for rising use in London and especially Strathclyde?

Secondly, there seem to be clear challenges over value for money for the operators and funders of dial-a-ride services. Declining demand will drive up unit trip costs which funders will increasingly find unattractive, especially at a time of uprecedented pressure on public spending. A report by JMP consultants in 2010 in Worcestershire compared the trip costs of ten British dial-a-rides, which were found to be between £6.73 and £17.17, with an average of £10.52 (Redditch Borough Council 2010)**.** Of the services described here, single cost-per-trip figures appear to be highest in London at around £25 (Freedom of Information request, 2015). In America, concern over rising costs associated with paratransit is increasing: costs rose by 197% over 12 years between 1999 and 2011 (Rosenbloom 2013) and typical cost per trip has risen to between $34 to $59 (Menninger and Werly 2014). As a result, new models of service delivery, emphasising integration with mainstream transport, are developing: “the compelling reason for setting up the integrated service has been the need to manage paratransit costs or reduce the need for paratransit services” (Weiner 2008).

Although the long term sustainability of dial-a-ride services is called into question by rising trip costs, it is worth bearing in mind how dial-a-ride costs compare to other transport services, such as supported bus services, home to school transport, patient transport and social work transport. These are not studied here, but the cost of these services can exceed those of dial-a-rides, sometimes by a considerable margin; an extreme example is East Lothian’s ‘Gaberlunzie’ rural bus service which reportedly cost £100 per passenger trip (Henderson, 2010). And it is also important to acknowledge that the services described here not only continue to provide over 4 million trips a year, but many services also continue to turn down many booking requests - typically around 10% (London, Lothian) owing to lack of service availability. So the demand for dial-a-ride is still significant.

Nevertheless, concern over rising dial-a-ride trip costs can only intensify in view of the long term downward ridership trend (see e.g. London Assembly, Centro). The overarching conclusion of this study is that persisting solely with historic dial-a-ride service models in the face of declining use and demand appears to be unsustainable. New models of service delivery must be developed in order to meet changing user needs and expectations. Introducing such change, while at the same time protecting the interests of the millions of people that continue to use dial-a-ride, is the key strategic challenge.

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