

The experiences of Dial-A-Ride users

In 2021, Transport for All and Age UK London teamed up to investigate the experiences of Dial-a-Ride users, the importance of the service as well as improvements that needed to be made. Dial-a-Ride is a free door-to-door bus service run by Transport for London (TfL) for disabled and older Londoners. We wanted to amplify the voices of Dial-a-Ride users during a challenging time for door-to-door transport. We produced a report published in July 2022 called [Dial-A-Ride: From Door to More](#) which captured the experiences of 14 Dial-a-Ride users. The research participants, who were interviewed between December 2021 and March 2022, came from a mix of backgrounds, had various impairments, and used a variety of mobility aids.

From our research, it is evident that the Dial-a-Ride service is highly valued by disabled and older Londoners for whom it can provide greater independence. At the same time, our research also revealed frustrations with the service due to long waiting times, late arrivals, distance restrictions, and inefficient route planning.

In this report we summarise key elements of the campaign and focus on the recommendations and how Transport for London (TfL) responded.

A summary of the report, Dial-a-Ride: From door to more

The key themes outlined in the report were:

Dial-a-Ride is essential to quality of life

In interviews Dial-a-Ride users spoke of the service as essential to maintaining a decent quality of life. For many users it is fundamental to their independence and helps to ensure they can do the things they want to do. Dial-a-Ride can play a vital role in reducing social isolation and the risk of it developing.

Dial-a-Ride enables access to support

Dial-a-Ride can bring people with shared experiences together. It gives people the opportunity to talk with others going through some of the same situations, attend social events and support groups.

Other transport is not an option

Dial-A-Ride offers free door-to-door transport and support on journeys and many research participants shared that they rely on this because public or private transport, or walking and wheeling is inaccessible to them. For some, the experience of using other modes of transport could be extremely stressful and therefore Dial-a-Ride is the only viable travel mode.

It is difficult to get the required bookings

At the time of the interviews, Dial-a-Ride users were able to make one 'advanced booking' per week and could make an unlimited number of 'next day' bookings. 'Same day' bookings were also offered, but availability was limited. Some interviewees mentioned that they could get bookings most of the time, but others reported that it was often difficult to get a booking at the time they needed. This had a significant impact.

In the past, Dial-a-Ride users could request 'regular bookings' for activities occurring at the same time and place. However, at the time of writing regular bookings cannot be requested by users themselves. For many of the interviewees this was very frustrating and meant spending more time having to make separate booking requests.

The limits on the distances that can be travelled have a significant impact

Dial-a-Ride journeys are often restricted to short distances. Information published by Transport for London refers to 'local journeys' without reference to specific distances. Despite this, there was a common perception among interviewees that journeys were restricted to five miles and limited to the borough where they lived. These limits often restricted Dial-a-Ride users from going the places they wanted to go and could therefore have a huge impact on everyday life.

Making bookings can be frustrating

When asking participants about the telephone booking system, almost all reported having to wait a considerable amount of time before their call was answered. This wasn't just frustrating; the act of holding the phone to the ear for long periods could be painful or not even an option for some. The cost of the calls was also a consideration, and some interviewees were very conscious that the longer the wait the larger the phone bill would be.

Whilst many had positive experiences with the bookings team, some found call handlers to be impatient or even on occasions to be rude.

Journeys are sometimes longer than they need to be

Many of the interviewees felt that the scheduling of Dial-a-Ride journeys (the route and order of drop-offs and collections) was inefficient and resulted in users spending longer on board than necessary.

Communication is poor

The interviews showed that it could be difficult to learn about changes and other updates to the service. Interviewees said that during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic the most common methods for receiving information about Dial-a-Ride were either word-of-mouth from fellow passengers and drivers, or through the recorded message on the telephone booking line.

Many Dial-a-Ride users we spoke to had not received newsletters or the 'In Touch' magazine (produced by TfL for Dial-a-Ride users) for a considerable amount of time. Participants who relied on alternative formats such as audio CDs, reported not having received them for a very long time.

Most drivers are very good

The overwhelming majority of interviewees were very happy with the bus drivers. We heard from several users who spoke of the drivers as helpful, courteous, and often willing to help in any occasion.

Our recommendations and TfL's response

In the research, interviewees were asked what improvements they would like to see. This is their service. Based on their responses to this question and the wider experiences of users, we included 13 recommendations in the report. In September 2022 TfL responded in writing to all of the report's recommendations. Below is a summary of the recommendations and the responses from TfL. The full six-page document with the responses can be found on our website. Age UK London and Transport for All also requested some further clarifications of points raised by TfL. We have referenced these in this document, and full details of the clarifications can be found on our website.

Recommendation 1: Allow Dial-a-Ride users to make longer journeys and ensure this is communicated to users and call-centre staff

Summary of response: "While Dial-a-Ride is designed for local trips, there are no distance or borough restrictions on Dial-a-Ride... However, we acknowledge that it is harder to get a booking for longer distances due to limited availability. With Dial-a-Ride being a multi-occupancy service, longer journeys can sometimes be declined on the basis that they could cause delays to other users' journeys or even prevent other users being able to travel at all.

At Dial-a-Ride's current capacity, accommodating an increase in longer journeys would decrease availability."

Recommendation 2: Reduce call waiting length. Users that have waited more than 10 minutes for their call to be picked up are offered a call-back within an hour.

Summary of response: “Long waiting times for booking are unacceptable and we are already putting in measures to address it. A new, simpler booking system will be implemented next year, as well as recruiting more staff to take bookings, which we expect to cut waiting times immediately. Additionally, we are exploring whether a call-back function could be offered within the new system.”

Clarifications and further correspondence: In further correspondence with TfL we asked whether staff would be recruited in 2022 and if more details could be provided about planned training. In September TfL responded that recruitment was underway and that all staff undertake Disability Equality Training delivered by Diversity & Ability, a social enterprise led by and for disabled people. Drivers are provided with additional training including dementia awareness and safeguarding training.

We also asked if TfL listens back to calls other than those that generate complaints. TfL replied that they did and that monitoring, and colleague coaching is part of their Team Leaders’ regular duties.

Recommendation 3: Accessible news and communications

Ensure newsletters and other communications including the In Touch magazine are distributed at regular points throughout the year.

Ensure all communications are available in a range of accessible formats including as audio CDs and in hardcopy format for users without internet access.

Summary of response: “Many customers and potential members take a web-first approach to customer information and the Dial-a-Ride pages give clear in-depth information on registering and booking. However, we understand that some customers are unable to access information online and benefit from having printed resources available. We offer our materials in CD format, as well as large-type and Braille editions upon request”.

Clarifications and further correspondence: In further correspondence with TfL we asked if TfL asked new members about their communication preferences including accessible formats. TfL replied that they did. We also asked how often the In Touch magazine was sent out. TfL acknowledges publications had been limited due to the pandemic and that the last edition was sent out in June 2022.

Recommendation 4: Guaranteed journeys. Implement changes that enable Dial-a-Ride users to be guaranteed a minimum of three return journeys per week.

Summary of response: “Unfortunately, guaranteeing a minimum number of journeys would require significantly increased funding, capping the number of trips available for customers currently travelling more than the minimum, charging members for journeys, or some combination of the above.”

Recommendation 5: Reduce booking refusals. Reduce the number of booking refusals as a proportion of total booking requests by 10% between September 2022 and September 2023.

Summary of response: “Dial-a-Ride has around 42,000 members across London and TfL is able to fulfil around 90 per cent of requests, meeting TfL’s target. We will always aim to deliver as many trips as we can and we are confident the new booking and scheduling system, planned for implementation in Winter 2023 will enable further efficiencies.”

Recommendation 6: Meaningful consultation with Dial-a-Ride users. The design of any new booking and scheduling system must be based upon meaningful consultation and testing with a range of Dial-a-Ride users that reflects the diversity of Dial-a-Ride users.

Summary of response: “We intend to involve a number of current members and potential customers in designing the online portal and would welcome the opportunity to involve Age UK London and Transport for All members in this process.”

Recommendation 7: Longer weekend opening hours. Extend operating hours to midnight on weekdays and to 1am on Friday, Saturday, and Sundays (and Bank Holidays)

Summary of response: “We understand the frustration of Dial-a-Ride users who are unable to use the service to travel later in the evening. Overall Dial-a-Ride passenger requests are down, and the financial situation makes the expansion of current service provision extremely difficult. We currently focus resources on meeting demand at the highest usage points of the day; while we operate until 10pm, there is low overall demand after 8pm.”

Recommendation 8: Raise Dial-a-Ride awareness

Undertake specific marketing and outreach activities to raise awareness of Dial-a-Ride.

With high levels of digital exclusion among older and disabled Londoners, ensure marketing activities are planned to reach all those that would benefit but do not have access to the internet.

Summary of response: “We agree that a variety of outreach channels are important to ensure we are reaching Londoners who might benefit from assisted transport and are always open to feedback on how we could improve this further. Our current approach includes distributing leaflets, working with destinations serving our customers and maintaining a significant online presence.”

Recommendation 9: Better process/information for non-urgent medical appointments

Build into the booking system an option to manually review destinations permitted for non-urgent medical appointments.

Improve staff training to increase understanding around the destinations permitted for non-urgent health appointments and provide clearer information to Dial-a-Ride users on permitted destinations.

Summary of response: “Dial-a-Ride is already able to review destinations manually, and this is part of our standard procedure. Our Reservationists, who answer Dial-a-Ride calls and help customers to book trips, are also trained extensively on which destinations Dial-a-Ride can take customers to and which must be through the NHS, and so on.”

Clarifications and further correspondence: In further correspondence with TfL we asked if they would seek to improve information for customers about the type of destinations that cannot use the service to take them to. TfL replied that some information is already available, but they will seek to improve this. Further details can be found at <https://content.tfl.gov.uk/in-touch.pdf>.

TfL also clarified that the types of trips they cannot accommodate are: Dial-a-Ride cannot accommodate:

- **Hospital and clinic appointments** – ‘Contact the medical professional who referred you, or the hospital/clinic, for information about alternative services that cater for hospital journeys. You can, however, use Dial-a-Ride to visit your GP’.
- **Day centres and school** – ‘Contact your day centre manager or school administrator for details about alternative services’.

- **Work** - Dial-a-Ride cannot easily accommodate daily trips to work due to limited resources. Contact your local job centre for details of the Access to Work scheme if you require this type of journey.

TfL say that they also send out this information to customers upon joining the service.

Recommendation 10: Booking confirmation. All email requests for next day bookings to be confirmed by 17:00 on the day of the request.

Summary of response: “We can receive requests for next day bookings up to and beyond 17:00, so confirming next day bookings by 17:00 would not always be practical. However, we do understand the desire for timely confirmation. We have investigated this and were not able to identify cases where customers have not received confirmations or declines in advance of the requested trip.”

Recommendation 11: Reduce late arrivals and publish data. Set a target to reduce late arrivals by 25% by September 2023 and publish data on the percentage of late arrivals.

Summary of response: “We are happy to publish data as requested but cannot commit to this reduction with current funding levels and an aging booking system. Currently around 85 per cent of trips arrive on time, and we do hope to improve this”.

Recommendation 12: Review the scheduling system & improve route efficiency

Commit to review the scheduling system and other available options to ensure routes are as efficient as possible for the largest number of passengers possible.

Summary of response: “The current scheduling system is 15 years old, and we are aware there are some issues. One of our key priorities for the new booking and scheduling system will be to improve route efficiency. Sometimes there is a reason for scheduling being done a certain way - for example, another passenger has been on the bus for a long time and needs to get to their destination as soon as possible.

However, sometimes it results from poor scheduling on our part, and we constantly analyse our performance. We also review long journeys to try to identify where things have gone wrong, and where improvements can be”.

Talking to TfL about Dial-a-Ride funding and working with Dial-a-Ride members

In addition to clarifications on topics related to the recommendations we asked TfL for further information on funding and engagement with Dial-a-Ride users around the development of systems and processes to improve the service.

On funding TfL said that they are firmly committed to providing the Dial-A-Ride service in future years, with current budgets adequate to meet expected demand.

On the topic of user involvement TfL said the scope for true co-production is limited but that the supplier (developing new systems) has a record of high customer satisfaction. TfL also say they believe it critical that Dial-a-Ride users are involved.

Comment and reflections on TfL's responses

We are pleased that TfL are announcing some positive changes following the campaigning of Dial-A-Ride members together with Age UK London and Transport for All.

The key changes are:

- Additional staff to reduce call waiting times.
- A new scheduling system to reduce inefficient journeys.
- Involving Dial-A-Ride members in the design of a new booking and scheduling system.

Despite these positive changes, we are disappointed that TfL has not seized the opportunity to make more of the changes that ourselves and the Dial-a-Ride members we work alongside wanted to see. These changes would have had a profound impact on Londoners who rely on door-to-door transport. Both our organisations are concerned that the responses received do not always indicate a sense of urgency from TfL.

In the context of the worsening cost-of-living crisis, we must ensure Dial-A-Ride, the only free door-to-door service available across London, is not deprioritised.

On some of the issues raised we are concerned that responses reflect or could give the impression that “business as usual” is sufficient. Based on what we hear from Dial-a-Ride users we do not believe that to be the case. We are particularly concerned about this in relation to the areas of communication with Dial-a-Ride users and marketing to reach potential customers.

We recognise the serious financial challenges faced by TfL. Indeed, both Transport for All and Age UK London have called on the government to provide long-term support for Transport for London on several occasions. However, many of our recommendations were not about expansion and new activity depending on new funding. Instead, Dial-A-Ride users are calling for improvements to the way things are currently done. Changes such as improvements to communications, including non-digital means of communication, do not rely on significant investment.

We are very concerned that in several areas, TfL do not appear to adequately acknowledge the level of the challenges that we have heard about from Dial-A-Ride members. An example of this is the inability to get bookings that are needed. Whilst TfL assured us that they take reducing social isolation seriously, it seems that there is a missed opportunity to make the service better. Positive changes have the potential to transform the lives of many Dial-a-Ride users.

We welcome TfL's intention to involve Dial-A-Ride members in the design of new systems. It is vital that we see **genuine co-production and paid engagement that reflects the expertise of Dial-A-Ride users.**

Dial-a-Ride members meet with TfL at City Hall

On 11th July 2022, soon after publication of the report, Age UK London and Transport for All invited eight of the research participants to City Hall, home to the Greater London Authority and London Assembly, to discuss service improvements directly with TfL.

The aim of the meeting, was to share the experiences of Dial-a-Ride users who presented the recommendations to James Mead, General Manager for Dial-a-Ride. The meeting was chaired by London Assembly Member, Caroline Pidgeon, along with three other Assembly Members who attended as observers (Elly Baker, Slân Berry and Nick Rodgers).

During the meeting five of the recommendations were presented by the Dial-a-Ride users who spoke powerfully about how the issues impacted them. James Mead, representing TfL responded to each recommendation. The quotes below are from Dial-a-Ride members and are all taken from the meeting on 11th July. Please note that pseudonyms for the Dial-a-Ride users have been used and the summary is not intended as a full transcript or set of minutes.

Bookings

Norman: *"Dial-a-Ride is essential...we all rely on it. I find myself in the position sometimes that I have to get somewhere quickly but the office says they can't take me, but they can bring me back... Sometimes I ask to go somewhere, and they say, 'oh we don't go there'."*

Paul: *"We had a Christmas party. I booked a journey, but the Dial-a-Ride didn't turn up. I was looking forward to seeing everyone and I kept on waiting, I was so anxious, and my anxiety rates just increased, I kept looking out the window. It was an experience I won't forget. I think sometimes they get a lot of bookings, and they have to cancel."*

Issue with making bookings

Carol: *"Sometimes you can be waiting up to 20 minutes. Would TfL consider changing to a free number to help with the cost of living?"*

Operating hours

Angela: *“Why did TfL cut their shift time from midnight to 10pm? If I go to the theatre that starts at 19:30, it won’t finish until 21:30. But the drivers want to pick me up at 21:00, Where does that leave me? I have a social life - we want a normal life.”*

Inability to make slightly longer journeys

Jamal: *“I’ve had a lot of journeys in the past I couldn’t make because of the distances...I have to look at the mileage or the distance which is very stressful... It’s frustrating, especially post pandemic when I want to go out, it seemed like the pandemic period was extended for me. I know there’s other services, but taxis have a cost.”*

Journeys take longer than necessary

Dana: *“With scheduling, I understand Dial-a-Ride is a shared service. But just recently, I wanted to go to a place in Gants Hill, Dial-a-Ride picked me up and took me to Barking and then Gants Hill, so I was on the bus for 45 mins rather than 5. With appointments, sometimes I’m late because of the scheduling. I keep missing appointments and they’re important.”*

Examples of other issues shared during the meeting

Alan: *“I now have to make difficult choices of having to make a monthly appointment with my osteopath or to go to my swimming club (recommended by the osteopath) due to the one (advanced booking) return journey a week rule. Because there’s only one return trip a week, I am now forced to make difficult choices. My quality of life is being steadily eroded... They need to bring back the regular bookings.”*

Derek: *“I’ve been a Dial-a-Ride member for 10 years, but I’ve only used it twice for all the reasons people have said. The bookings are not always convenient for me. My mum calls for me and she’s on the phone for ages so we just end up giving up and looking at alternatives, we’ve heard that Taxicard is an alternative but it’s not. After 4 pm you can forget about using it.”*

London Assembly pass motion supporting the report

On 8th September 2022, the London Assembly unanimously passed a motion, calling on TfL to improve the service.

The London Assembly said that Dial-a-Ride is a vital service to many Londoners, however it could be improved with minimal cost, to ensure that those who rely on it have the best service possible.

The motion was proposed by London Assembly Member, Emma Best AM and seconded by London Assembly Member, Caroline Pidgeon. The full text of the motion can be found at <https://www.london.gov.uk/motions/dial-ride>

We welcome the London Assembly's support for the report and are particularly grateful to Caroline Pidgeon AM for chairing the meeting at City Hall and for her, longstanding support.

On 15th December, London Assembly Member Caroline Pidgeon, asked the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, questions about Dial-a-Ride during a Mayor's Question Time session. Caroline referred to the Dial-a-Ride: From Door to More report and focused on asking the Mayor to make sure that Dial-a-Ride truly does serve customers until 10pm. An experience of many Dial-a-Ride customers, including some of those interviewed for the research, suggests that the reality for too many is that they have to leave social events at 8:30pm. The full exchange can be viewed here starting at 34:00 to 40:10: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMqa68DmmBU&t=4534s>

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the 14 Dial-a-Ride members that have provided such a vital contribution to the report and the campaign.