

Monday, 29 April 2024

## **Surrey Connect: Digital Demand Responsive Transport Update**

Purpose of report: To provide an update to the Select Committee on the progress of the Surrey Connect Digital Demand Responsive Transport service (DDRT).

### **Introduction**

1. The County Council has been successful in implementing several Surrey Connect DDRT schemes across Surrey since the first pilot scheme was introduced in Mole Valley in May 2022. Further expansion of the growing network of DDRT services is planned for both the 2024/25 and 2025/26 financial years.
2. The DDRT service is designed to provide a more flexible and responsive transport service and expand available travel options for residents.
3. Coverage of the Surrey Connect DDRT service is planned to be widespread across the county, however, each individual service operates within a localised zone to ensure it remains agile to local residents needs. As such it is designed to complement other bus services and rail travel, rather than compete with them.
4. The scheme rollout is developing at pace and use of the DDRT services continues to grow. Ongoing monitoring is required as the services embed and the customer base expands, however, early data is encouraging and in particular, the customer feedback received to date has been very positive.

### **Background**

5. The County Council was successful with a bid to the Department for Transport (DfT) Rural Mobility Fund (RMF) for a pilot Mole Valley Digital Demand Responsive Transport (DDRT) service. The County Council secured funding for a two-year operation, which started in May 2022. The DDRT service was

combined with a s106 planning obligation to serve the new Queen Elizabeth Foundation HQ and adjacent housing development near Leatherhead. Mole Valley District Council was contracted to operate the DDRT buses on behalf of the County Council.

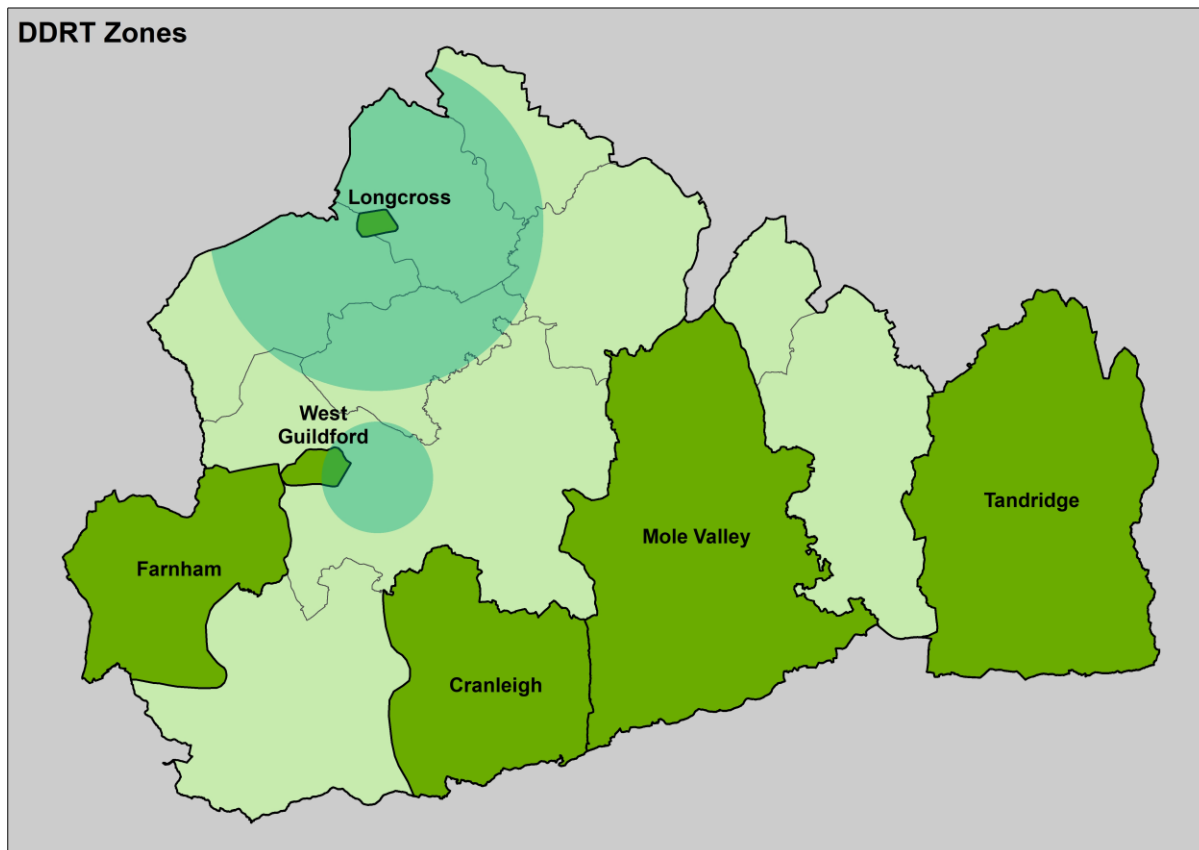
6. Initially the scheme operated across the north of Mole Valley using two zero emission electric accessible minibuses. This increased to four buses to cover the whole of the Mole Valley area from June 2023. The service was well received locally with high passenger satisfaction and much positive feedback. The Mole Valley DDRT scheme is well used in comparison to other DDRT schemes funded through RMF nationally.
7. As part of the Future Bus Network Review undertaken in 2022/23, the County Council consulted with residents and stakeholders on the proposal to introduce more DDRT services and in some cases replace infrequent conventional local bus services with DDRT services. The aim was to provide all residents and across all age groups with greater flexibility with travel times and destinations, together with increased hours of operation. The DDRT services are similar to conventional local bus services in that passengers board and alight at pre-determined bus stops (with physical infrastructure or virtual bus stops) but with a greater flexibility of destination for those passengers.
8. Surrey Connect is not a traditional Dial-a-Ride (DAR) scheme; DAR services are community operated services primarily used by older residents who may have limited mobility and have difficulty accessing conventional public transport services. This will include passengers who are unable to get to and from bus stops and require additional assistance. DAR services tend to be door to door services as opposed to stop to stop for DDRT.
9. The National Bus Strategy (Bus Back Better) published in March 2020 required the County Council to establish an Enhanced Partnership with bus operators and to also develop a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP), which sets out the route map to increasing passenger usage through investment in infrastructure, information and new and more frequent bus services. Our approved BSIP included an aspiration to build on the Mole Valley Connect DDRT scheme. Using the experience of the Mole Valley Connect service and other community transport schemes operating across the county, alongside feedback from the Future Bus Network Review, a DDRT expansion programme was developed.
10. On 28 March 2023 Cabinet agreed to the Phase 1 programme of new DDRT services. This was the expansion of the Mole Valley DDRT service to cover the whole of the District, plus a further five schemes. Future phases were to be subject to service performance and identification of funding.

11. Contracts for Phase 1 were tendered for a one-year period starting September 2023. These were retendered as part of the Phase 2 programme, which will start operation September 2024.
12. Padam, the technology provider, was contracted at the start of the Mole Valley scheme to provide the booking and scheduling portal and to develop the digital booking Application (App). Although the service is operated by different providers, Padam provides the booking platform for all the services and the whole DDRT service is operated under the Surrey Connect brand.
13. To support the Council's decarbonisation agenda, Greener Futures funding is being used to procure electric minibuses that our contractors use to provide the DDRT services. By September of this year we plan to have 28 electric minibuses operating on DDRT services in Surrey, adding to the complementary work in transitioning the community transport fleet to zero emission vehicles.

<b>Current DDRT Provision</b>
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14. In September 2023 five further Surrey Connect services started operation, using eight additional vehicles, making a total of 12 mini buses in service. Overall therefore, current DDRT schemes are as follows:
  - a) West Guildford: this replaced a conventional limited public bus service.
  - b) Tandridge: existing DRT scheme in Tandridge has been improved.
  - c) Farnham area : existing DRT scheme centred on Farnham has been improved.
  - d) Cranleigh area: new DDRT scheme introduced.
  - e) Longcross: existing DRT scheme centred on the Longcross development improved.
  - f) Mole Valley area: the original and now expanded RMF funded scheme.
15. The DDRT map below shows the current scheme operating areas; the travel zone for West Guildford and Longcross are denoted by light green circles:

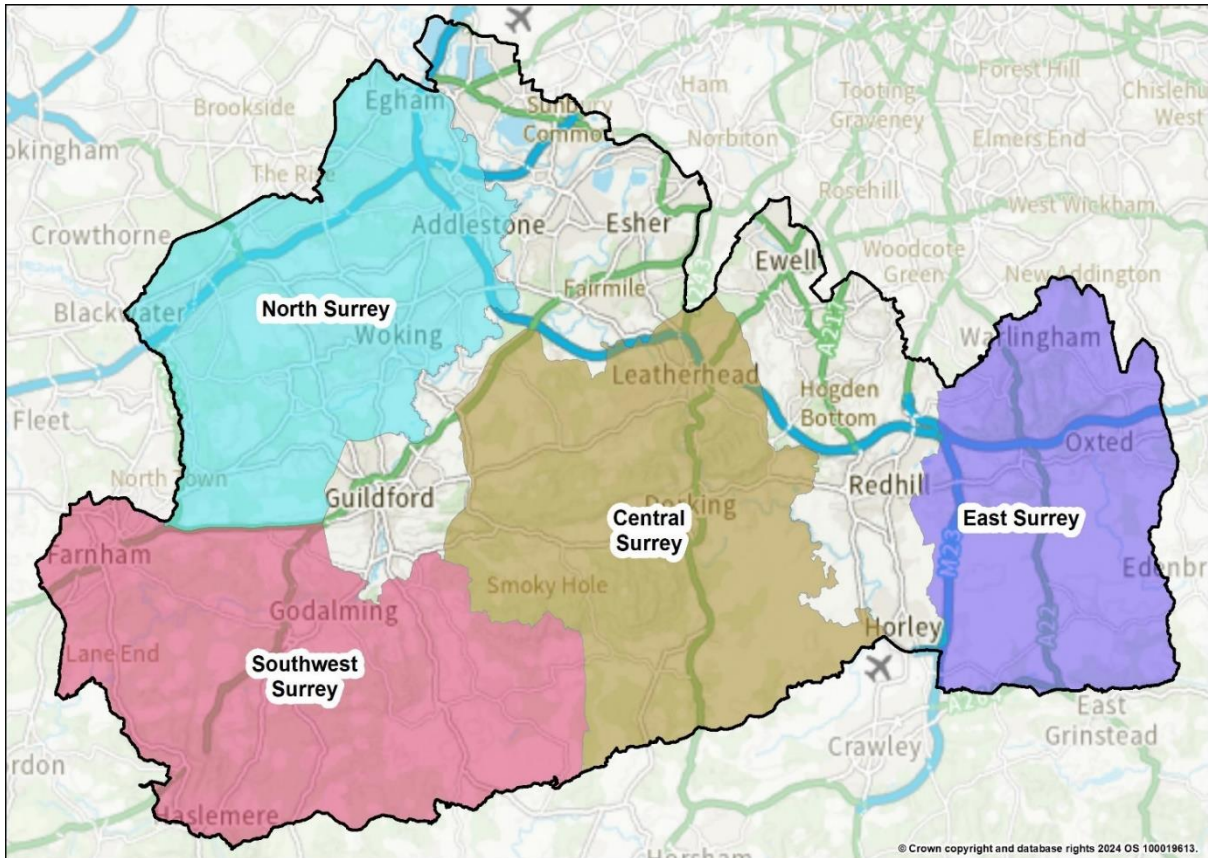
## DDRT Zones



16. All DDRT services operate Monday to Friday 7am – 7 pm, and 8am - 6pm on Saturday. Passengers can book their trips via the Surrey Connect App, through the website or by using the operations call centre. It should be noted that some 80% of trips are booked via the App.
17. Fares are set on a mileage basis. An adult single fare for journeys under 5 miles is £2, 5 to 7 miles is £4, 7 to 10 miles is £6. Younger people pay half the above fares.

### **Planned DDRT Provision, September 2024**

18. Phase 2 of the Surrey Connect network expansion, starting in September 2024, will increase the operational fleet of minibuses from 12 to 28 and expand the services broadly in the areas as shown on the map below:



19. Within each of the four larger geographical areas in the map above, the Surrey Connect services will operate across three or four defined zones. These zones have been designed to enable users to access local services, including shopping, local medical facilities, leisure, and onward travel by bus and/or rail.
  
20. Certain areas of Surrey are not covered by DDRT, for example, central Guildford, Epsom and Redhill. Whilst even more DDRT services are being considered to further expand DDRT coverage from 2025, we need to recognise that some areas of the county already have excellent local bus services which are, in the main, commercially operated. We need to ensure that DDRT does not abstract passengers and revenue from these local bus services, whilst supporting them to be even more attractive so that they may continue to serve local communities. This balance is very important, as DDRT needs to be complimentary to the local bus network.
  
21. Our early thoughts for 2025 include consideration of new DDRT services for parts of Elmbridge, Reigate & Banstead and Spelthorne, although other areas may also emerge as our plans become further developed. DDRT expansion will include an assessment of additional cost and available funding and an assessment of the existing public transport already available to residents and any gaps in provision helping us to understand how DDRT might enhance the overall public transport offer. Part of this is seeking to understand how DDRT may improve accessibility for all residents in potential new areas, whilst also

reviewing the performance of existing DDRT services to make any changes where they are needed, including providing additional capacity.

22. As part of supporting new housing developments across Surrey we have also been successful in securing funding for DDRT services.

## **Budget**

23. The forecast DDRT expenditure for 2023/24 is £1.206m. The budget for 2024/25, inclusive of implementing the new areas in Phase 2, is £4.85m. Phase two is now due to commence operation in September 2024, meaning that the full year allocation will not be required in 2024/25 financial year.
24. Fares income from the DDRT services is retained by the County Council. Currently we are forecasting between 10% and 15% recovery of the running costs of DDRT services. As most of the services are still in their infancy, data is still limited in terms of fares recovery and potential longer-term projections.
25. It is worth noting that the cost of providing the DDRT service is largely fixed regardless of how many passengers are using the service, which is similar to other bus services. As we analyse the current and potential usage data further, we will have a better sense of how we can reduce the gap between the running costs and fares income. However, it is important to note that due to the nature of the service provided, we do not expect fares revenue to match the cost of running the service. This is similar to the local bus network that SCC funds with the main difference being that DDRT income is retained by the County Council whereas local bus operators retain the fares income for the majority of contracted local bus services.
26. A further allocation of £3.15m is included in the 2024/25 budget for the implementation of additional Phase three schemes. These new DDRT schemes will now likely commence in September 2025, subject to tender and the necessary approvals being secured. This means that this budget allocation will not be required to start until September 2025.

## **Performance of Current Surrey Connect DDRT Services**

27. As the DDRT services are so new, and were introduced very quickly following the Mole Valley trial, we are still developing the measures are required to assess their overall performance. The Padam booking and scheduling software that supports the operation of the DDRT services provides access to a comprehensive range of data and statistics, including passenger usage, user satisfaction and feedback. Metrics on service and vehicle efficiency are also available.

28. As noted in paragraph 5 above the Mole Valley Surrey Connect DDRT scheme was funded as part of the Government’s Rural Mobility Fund. This is a programme which awarded funding to local authorities to introduce pilot DDRT services, and to understand the value and impact of these schemes.
29. The Rural Mobility Fund Evaluation: Interim Report published September 2023 included performance data for all pilot schemes across the country. Daily passenger loadings for the nine pilot DDRT schemes were reported to range from 11 – 67 passengers per day. Since that report the Mole Valley Surrey Connect service has continued to grow patronage, and in fact, it averaged 89 passengers per day during September 2023 which compares favourably with original pilot figures. Patronage is not the only measure of success and further work will continue to be undertaken to produce performance measures that will set targets and allow us to track and monitor overall service performance and value for money. Once complete, these will be included in the Environment, Infrastructure and Growth Performance Framework. To aid understanding, below is a selection of performance data on the DDRT services.

**i. Registered users for each DDRT ‘scheme’**

30. The table below provides a snapshot of registered users at March 2024 for each DDRT scheme. This highlights comparative data on the scale and reach of each of the schemes, which can be considered alongside passenger trips.

<b>Zone</b>	<b>Registered users</b>
Cranleigh	399
Farnham	950
Longcross	82
West Guildford	470
Tandridge	807
Mole Valley	4337
<b>Total</b>	<b>7045</b>

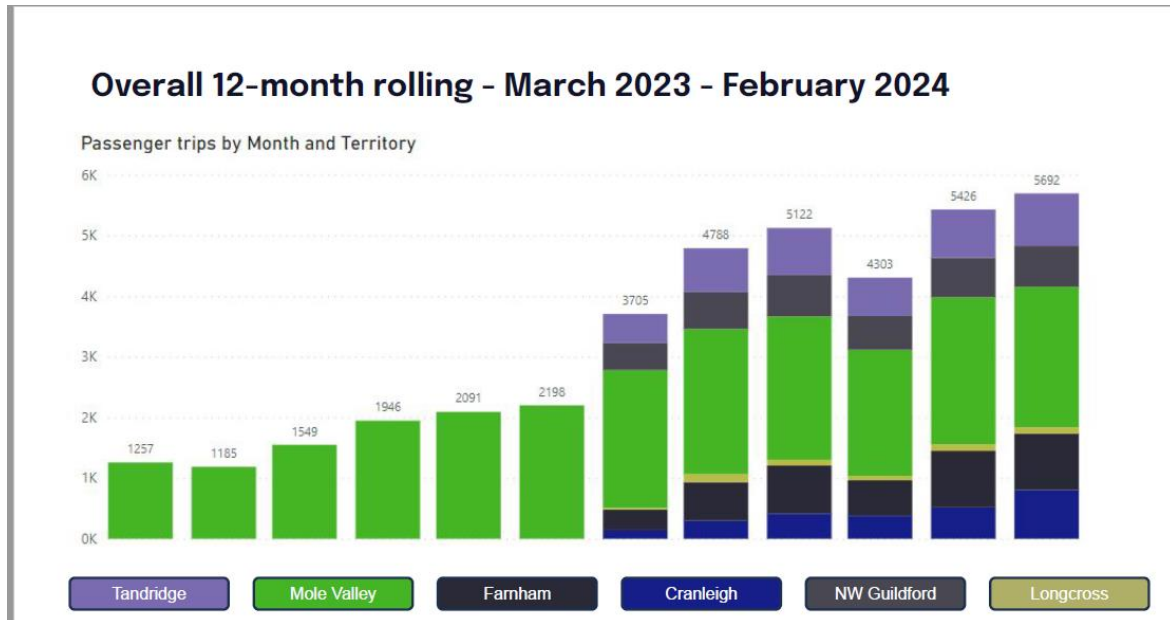
**ii. Passenger trips (2023/24) for each DDRT ‘scheme’**

<b>Zone</b>	<b>Sept</b>	<b>Oct</b>	<b>Nov</b>	<b>Dec</b>	<b>Jan</b>	<b>Feb</b>	<b>March</b>	<b>Totals</b>
<b>Cranleigh</b>	143	297	415	381	518	694	838	<b>3286</b>
<b>Farnham</b>	335	636	791	582	930	893	1005	<b>5172</b>
<b>Longcross</b>	30	131	95	72	110	102	114	<b>654</b>
<b>West Guildford</b>	448	608	680	555	651	627	806	<b>4375</b>
<b>Tandridge</b>	477	723	778	630	785	845	846	<b>5084</b>
<b>Mole Valley</b>	2143	2393	2363	2080	2422	2215	2314	<b>15930</b>

31. The above demonstrate that, as experienced with the Mole Valley scheme, it takes time for passenger trip numbers to grow.

**iii. Growth in passenger trips by DDRT 'scheme'**

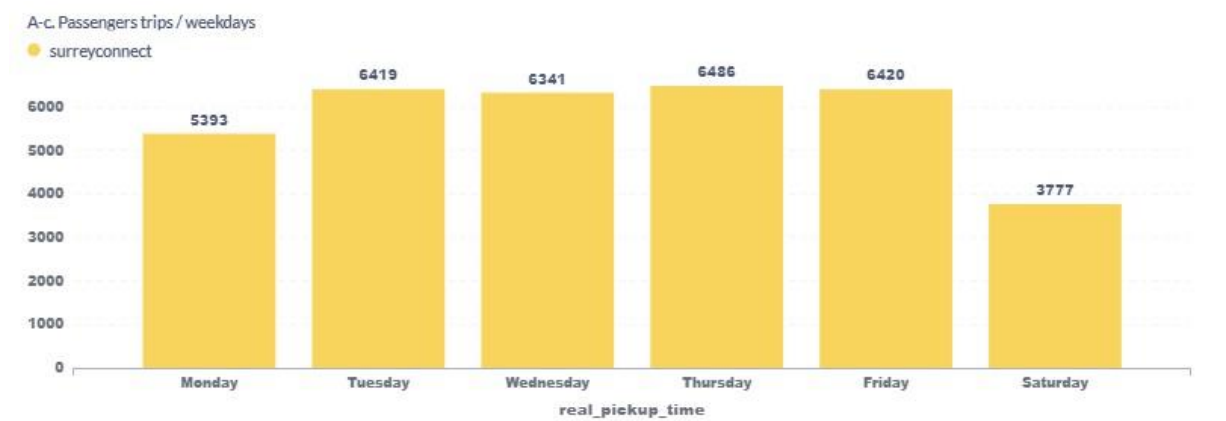
32. The graph below shows the pattern of growth across the services since March 2023:



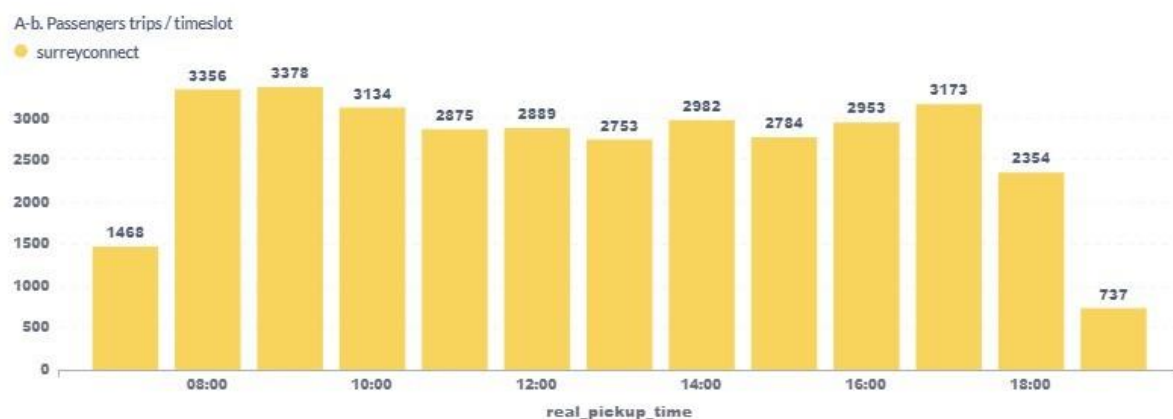
**iv. Summary of passenger trips showing the busiest days and hours**

33. The graphs below show passenger activity each day of the week and the times of day that passengers are travelling. This data is important because it enables us to identify where there may be capacity in the network. The data highlights:

- Passenger usage of the DDRT services is slightly lower on a Monday than Tuesday to Friday, with daily ridership on Tuesday to Friday all similar.
- Saturday ridership is approximately 60% of the weekday demand.
- Passenger usage is greatest during the morning and early evening peak periods, with a drop off of usage at either end of the operating day.







34. The above is an aggregate of all passenger journeys for all DDRT schemes, although it can be broken down scheme by scheme.
35. There is a balance between providing a more universal service and understanding the impact of one cohort or particular journey type potentially overwhelming a DDRT service. On this basis, it should be noted that DDRT does not support journeys to school. If we were to allow school trips to be booked, all DDRT vehicles would become unavailable to all other residents for roughly an hour and a half in the morning and then again in the late afternoon 190 days each year, as the minibuses would be taking children to and from school. This would mean DDRT would not be available to all other residents wanting to commute to work or railway stations, those wishing to access town centres or early medical appointments, etc. It would essentially become a minibus service only available between 10.00 and 14.00. Ridership would quickly decline, and we would fail to deliver on our objective of offering a flexible on-demand service to residents.
36. Facilitating journeys to school could also distort catchment areas and potentially impact the Council's home to school transport policy, noting the vehicles are small minibuses and cannot cater for large peak time school movements.

**v. Passenger satisfaction rates and user feedback**

37. Passengers are invited to provide feedback on their experiences of using the Surrey Connect DDRT services. The table below gives the customer satisfaction rate for each scheme:

Zone	Service Rating (out of 5)	%	Driver Rating (out of 5)	%	Average	%
Cranleigh	4.93	98.60%	4.96	99.20%	4.95	98.90%
Farnham	4.92	98.40%	4.97	99.40%	4.95	98.90%
Longcross	5.00	100.00%	5.00	100.00%	5.00	100.00%
West Guildford	4.89	97.80%	4.90	98.00%	4.90	97.90%
Tandridge	4.96	99.20%	4.95	99.00%	4.96	99.10%
Mole Valley	4.93	98.60%	4.92	98.40%	4.93	98.50%
<b>Total</b>	<b>4.94</b>	<b>98.77%</b>	<b>4.95</b>	<b>99.00%</b>	<b>4.94</b>	<b>98.88%</b>

38. Some of the individual (unedited) feedback received from Surrey Connect users is set out below to give a flavour of what residents think about DDRT:

- Very punctual. Very helpful and courteous, especially with the second passenger he picked up, also for the hospital, who had mobility issues and so was a little slow. Brilliant all round.
- brilliant thanks. on time, comfortable bus, clean and very attentive crew. the app is so incredibly easy to use. all I can say is if this is the standard of service and it continues, it will be my choice of transport.
- What an amazing service!
- First trip and would definitely use this service again - excellent idea!
- very polite and friendly driver! had a good chat along the way too, i enjoyed the ride 😊
- very impressed with the service, driver was very helpful and kind. will definitely book again and recommend to others.
- Brilliant service, although as it is on demand, you should charge more, the service warrants it.
- excellent service. really friendly driver. is such a great service when you live in a rural area.
- Surrey Connect is shaping up to be a very valuable service indeed. An excellent experience all round, app works well, easy to book a journey, notifications are quick to come through and are accurate. The drivers are helpful and friendly and the journeys comfortable. I hope that the service gets a good take up.

## Conclusions

39. Our Surrey Connect DDRT network is still relatively new. However, DDRT is already proving to be very popular with residents with the number of users and patronage steadily growing. Surrey Connect DDRT has an exceptionally high user satisfaction rating, notwithstanding it is still a developing service.
40. Evidence shows that it takes time for patronage to grow on any new public transport service; DDRT is no exception. We plan to do more to promote and market the Surrey Connect DDRT services as we expand the network of services, which will help us to grow patronage even further. DDRT is therefore helping the County Council to get more people onto bus services, with wider

benefits of reduced congestion and an associated carbon reduction. This supports the Local Transport Plan 4 approach of avoid-shift-improve.

41. Although some infrequent local bus services have been subsumed into the Surrey Connect DDRT services in the Phase 1, DDRT is designed to complement existing public transport, rather than replicate or replace it.

<b>Recommendations:</b>
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42. It is recommended that the Communities, Environment and Highways Select Committee continue to be updated on Surrey Connect DDRT services in 2024/25, which could include:

- a. More detailed DDRT service performance data and metrics;
- b. A 'live' demonstration of the software that supports the operation of the DDRT services;
- c. Detail on the operating arrangements for the new Surrey Connect DDRT services starting in September 2024; and
- d. A communications plan that will be used to support the introduction of the new Surrey Connect DDRT services to help grow patronage on new and DDRT existing services, linked to growing bus patronage more widely.

<b>Next steps:</b>
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The retender of contracts for Phase 1 and tender for Phase 2 Surrey Connect DDRT services was undertaken earlier in 2024. Contract approval and award to the successful providers is planned for April and May 2024. Mobilisation will then follow, with the contracts and services to go-live in September 2024. This will increase the operational fleet of minibuses from 12 to 28 and expand the DDRT services in the areas detailed in the body of the report.

Planning for a Phase 3 expansion of Surrey Connect DDRT has already started, and this will continue throughout 2024/25. Phase 3 services will commence in 2025, subject to funding.

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**Sources/background papers:** None

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