

Pilot in Värmland

Demand-Responsive
Transport to ensure
accessibility, availability
and reliability of rural
public transport



PILOT IN VÄRMLAND, SWEDEN

Starting and ending date of pilot

01.10.2021-...

Map



SHORT INTRODUCTION TO THE PILOT

The pilot is carried out by Region Värmland, under the trademark Värmlandstrafik, a project partner of the RESPONSE project. The beneficiary area was also the Värmland region in Sweden. Region Värmland's (Sweden) demand-responsive transport (DRT) pilot investigates how seamless travel offers could be designed to encourage vulnerable traveller groups to use less of cost-intensive Special Transport Services (STS).

In Sweden, STS is provided to individuals that have been approved of having a non-temporary disability and have mobility issues when travelling alone or on public transport. At the same time, Sweden also offers patients transport schemes where transport to and from the health care treatment is available at a small booking fee which is heavily subsidised for all residents. This patient transports scheme can also be utilised by STS approved travellers. Today, all patient transport options can be booked only by phone. An operator receives the details about when and where the passenger needs to travel and makes a seat reservation on the agreed journey. Sometimes specially equipped vehicles are needed and sometimes the passengers use regular public transport. In this network of possible transportation modes, some of the journeys are demand-responsive while others use conventional public transport.

Region Värmland built a digital booking platform for the pilot where the users can book a seat in the patient transport schemes to and from a health care appointment. Furthermore, Region Värmland will waive the booking fee if the users decide to use the digital platform as this frees up more time for booking agents to tend to customers with actual needs of phoning in their booking.



Demand-responsive transport in Värmland
Photo: Region Värmland

Pilot audience

Patients who need transport to and from the health care treatment.

Aim of pilot

The pilot aims to investigate whether the availability of digital bookings in combination with a new pricing strategy and better integrity encourage travellers of vulnerable groups to use more regular public transport, especially for medical-related trips. This will also mean cost savings for public transport authorities and hopefully reduced emissions by introducing more people to opt for patient transports instead of private vehicles when going to their health care appointments.

Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic heavily influenced the pilot. As the service was tailored for patients and STS travellers, who were considered risk groups, it was hard to launch the pilot during the pandemic. It has been historical in that sense that PTAs and PTOs in Sweden have advised customers to avoid using public transports, and therefore the pilot has also been postponed for a long time. However, society started to return to a new kind of normal in fall 2021 and thus, a soft launch of the pilot was possible in October 2021. As the final restrictions in Sweden were lifted, there was still some reluctance to start the pilot on the broadest scale since the target audience is still considered a risk group. Therefore, 26 carefully selected individuals were invited to test the pilot.

Covid-19 also gave a reason to incorporate some aspects of the pandemic into the pre-pilot survey that was designed to give a good baseline for analysing the effect of this pilot on customer travel behaviour.



EVALUATION

It is hard to evaluate a pilot with such a short time in production, and therefore it has been decided that the pilot will not end just because the RESPONSE project is ending. The pilot launched in October 2021. However, since health care appointments are often planned in advance, and the communication about the service was limited to Region Värmland, the pilot saw no actual bookings during the first month. The first booking came instead at the beginning of November and during the first month of booking, Region Värmland was able to get 18 bookings and three customers. This may seem very limited, but considering the small sample of invited pilot testers (26 individuals), this is still a satisfactory result after a month of piloting.

Customer experience

As for customer experience, there has been little feedback from the three users so far. Some understanding of customer behaviour can be found in the pre-pilot survey conducted in the summer of 2020. Overall, customers are highly satisfied with the services offered when it comes to booking, safety, hospitality and service quality, while some potential for improvement exists in communication. Some also rated the waiting times as something that could be improved regarding phone bookings. This shows that customers are overall satisfied with how things are run today, and perhaps it is not in the consumer's interest to introduce a new booking system.

Furthermore, it shows that STS passengers and health care transport passengers are not comfortable with digital bookings. They feel that their knowledge of digital equipment and ability to use these digital aids are limited. They are also having difficulty seeing the advantages of digital bookings and show low tendencies to try such services. This was illustrated quite clearly in the first month of the pilot since only three of the 26 testers have opted to try a new service. However, the three people who actually tried the service have done repeated bookings, indicating that the booking platform is easier to use than expected.

This means that if Region Värmland is to introduce a digital booking system permanently in the future, it is important to consider if customers are afraid, unwilling or lacking the knowledge for using such a system. Region Värmland will likely need to work hard to introduce this new system to the customers and help them a few times to show how easy it is. This is recommended for the project group to continue working on in 2022, as the pilot lives on.

Some other interesting findings in the survey had to do with the Covid aspects. It was found that the customers using tailored transportation modes felt much safer using these compared to regular public transport during the pandemic. The reason for these customers to travel less with STS and health care transport during the pandemic was that there were fewer activities to travel to rather than any concern for disease transmission or other restrictions and recommendations. The overall results also show that as soon as the pandemic is over, most customers expect to return to their pre-pandemic travelling behaviour.

Finally, a very uplifting finding of the survey is that the perceived accessibility of the service is very high in general. This can be summarised by the quote, "I can live the life I wish with the help of Region Värmland and Värmlandstrafik" which really is a high accolade to receive.

Cost-benefit

When it comes to actual costs for setting up the service, they have been limited to developing a web platform that will allow users to log on to and book their transports. The actual transportation has been carried out with existing public transport infrastructure, including the actual transports and underlying systems for planning. It has therefore not driven any extra costs in that sense.

However, an opportunity cost that arises is the forgone small booking fee that is waived as Region Värmland tries to push customers to use the online platform. There has been an idea that this fee could be incorporated into the medical appointment fee in the future if the pilot does well since Region Värmland's health care and public transport are both under the same organisation. This will further promote sustainable travel options for those patients who use cars as transportation methods to their health care appointments.

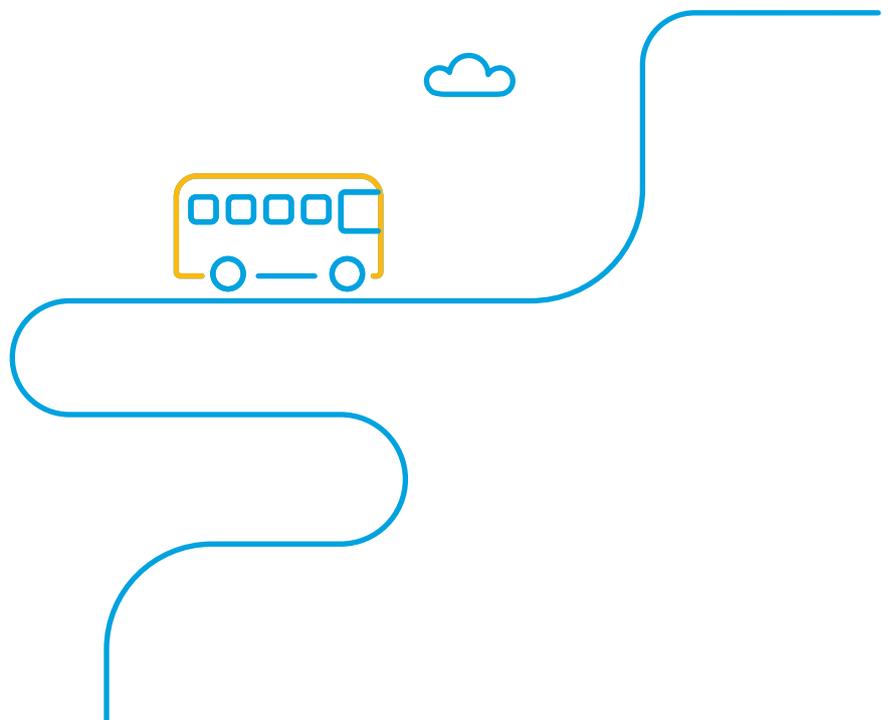
Looking at the benefits, the idea was and still is to become more cost-efficient for these transports. This could be achieved by reducing the number of calls needing to be handled by Region Värmland's booking central and by reducing the administration of compensation claims from users after their travels. It is also intended to reduce the number of STS travels, as users might not actually book less cost-intense transport unless the system helps them. Thus, resulting in increased efficiency and a cost-saving for Region Värmland. It is, however, too early to evaluate these factors at the current stage in the process.

The hope is also that the customers will be more satisfied when the phone booking queue is shortened since this was one of the few areas that had the potential for improvement according to the survey results. Finally, by introducing an attractive service that needs little effort from its users, Region Värmland wishes to move more people away from using their private cars towards a more sustainable option, which is vital for the future of our environment. As the pilot will continue into 2022, the recommendation is to fully evaluate the effects of these costs and benefits further down the line of the pilot.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the experience with the pilot has been shaking at best due to the Covid-19 worldwide pandemic. Yet, Region Värmland has learned a lot about its customers and users of these services. The survey showed that vulnerable groups have been travelling less because they have fewer activities to attend to, due to the pandemic and not so much because of the fear of the virus. Customers are also quite reluctant in using digital tools for booking, mostly because they are new and people feel unfamiliar with them.

Therefore, this will provide a real challenge in the future if the pilot is made permanent and will require effective communications and support to encourage vulnerable groups to use the service. If the pandemic allows, Region Värmland continues to be hopeful that the use of this service will increase during 2022, remain determined to continue with the pilot and promote it further, in order to evaluate it based on bigger participation than has yet to be reached.



Response



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