

ADMINISTRATION RESPONSE: DEDICATED ACCESSIBLE TRANSIT SERVICE AUDIT

RECOMMENDATION

That the February 18, 2025, City Operations report CO02762, be received for information.

Requested Action	Information only		
ConnectEdmonton's Guiding Principle	ConnectEdmonton Strategic Goals		
CONNECTED This unifies our work to achieve our strategic goals.	Urban Places		
City Plan Values	BELONG. LIVE. THRIVE. ACCESS.		
City Plan Big City Move(s)	Inclusive and compassionate	Relationship to Council's Strategic Priorities	Mobility Network
Corporate Business Plan	Serving Edmontonians		
Council Policy, Program or Project Relationships	DATS Program and Service Review		
Related Council Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> September 17, 2024 - CO02352 Rider Experience for Paratransit Dedicated Accessible Transit Service February 6, 2024 - CO01552 Commingle Paratransit and On Demand Services May 1, 2023 - UPE01190 Vehicle for Hire Program's 2022 and 2023 Work Plan Overview October 16, 2020 - CR_8036 Accessible Transit Voucher Pilot Program October 16, 2020 - CR_7353 - DATS Program Service Enhancements - Update and Next Steps October 15, 2018 - CR_5823 DATS Challenges, Data and Improvements 		

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Executive Summary

- Administration has implemented several enhancements to paratransit service, which includes completing a Program and Service Review in 2018/19, conducting rider engagement, and developing a multi-year service enhancement plan, approved by Council in 2019, to improve the rider experience. Since that time, several rider experience improvements have been implemented as part of the journey of continuous improvement.
- In 2024, the Office of the City Auditor (the Auditor) conducted an audit of Dedicated Accessible Transit Service (DATS) with the objective of determining if the ETS branch manages paratransit service effectively and efficiently to serve Edmontonians who are unable to use conventional transit.
- Administration accepts all of the recommendations and the corresponding actions will further enhance the efficiency, effectiveness and overall quality of paratransit service in Edmonton.
- Administration is committed to addressing all of the Auditor's recommendations by 2026.

REPORT

Paratransit service, delivered in Edmonton through Dedicated Accessible Transit Service (DATS), is a door-to-door shared ride public transportation service for those who are not able to use conventional transit service. It helps remove barriers by ensuring every rider has access to the benefits of public transit to any location in Edmonton. DATS operates under several core principles of service, which were developed in consultation with riders and community groups. These principles are safety, respect, customer service, compassion and teamwork.

Unlike conventional transit, DATS trips are booked in advance to ensure vehicles are being used efficiently to accommodate all trip requests. DATS uses multiple vehicle types to accommodate the diverse needs of riders, including lift buses, minivans, wheelchair-accessible minivans and taxi sedans. All DATS drivers are trained to support passengers in safely accessing the vehicle, providing assistance with seating, safely securing mobility aids, through to their destination and return trip.

DATS was first introduced in Edmonton in 1975 and since that time, has expanded and further integrated with transit service in the city. This includes incorporating rider-facing technology; implementing fare integration across transit; ETS transitioning to a fully accessible conventional transit fleet to better support accessibility and inclusion across the transit network; delivering travel training to riders; as well as, most recently, merging conventional and paratransit transit operator classifications within the transit workforce.

Since 2018, Administration has implemented several enhancements in DATS as part of continuous improvement, and to address recommendations and feedback collected during a Program and Service Review and through rider engagement. As noted in CO02352 Rider Experience for Paratransit Dedicated Accessible Transit Service, more than 26 changes have been made to improve the DATS rider experience (Attachment 1 - DATS Program Service Enhancement Plan Update).

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DATS trip volumes have recovered to 93 per cent of pre-pandemic levels, as outlined in Attachment 2. It is projected that future growth in trip volume will closely align with increases due to population growth and changing demographics in Edmonton's population.

The Auditor's eight recommendations will lead to further strengthening processes, documentation and controls in support of continuous improvement across the Edmonton Transit Service branch and DATS.

Audit Recommendations and Responses

Administration accepts all of the Auditor's recommendations and will have completed all of the corresponding actions for the Auditor to review by December 31, 2025. A summary of audit recommendations and responses is summarized in Attachment 3.

Audit Recommendation 1

We recommend that DATS update and use documented assessment guidelines for making eligibility decisions, and formally review these decisions to provide fair and consistent access to the service for those who need it.

The current eligibility approval process ETS has followed is designed to be compassionate and inclusive, with the majority of applicants approved without requiring referral to an Occupational Therapist. The current eligibility process incorporates best practices to ensure appropriate public transit service is provided to those who need it. This includes:

- Pre-screening interviews with potential applicants
- A process that aligns all eligibility decisions with the applicant's ability to use conventional transit
- A comprehensive and inclusive application form that considers a broad spectrum of physical and cognitive disabilities
- Conditional eligibility for applicants who can access conventional transit for some travel needs, such as in summer months or when travelling with a companion
- A multi-stage formal appeals process to help ensure determination of eligibility is fair, comprehensive and accountable
- Accessible transit training programs to help those able to use conventional transit for some or all of their travel needs

While DATS' staff are experienced in paratransit eligibility, there are opportunities to update formal guideline documentation and develop quality assurance processes for eligibility decisions to help ensure consistency in these determinations. Administration is working with an external third-party specialist in paratransit eligibility to review and improve its eligibility processes to respond to the Auditor's recommendation.

Administration will document guidelines, refresh training materials for staff and establish practices for an eligibility quality assurance program. Updated eligibility decision guidelines and training materials are expected to be ready for the Auditor to review by June 30, 2025.

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Audit Recommendation 2

We recommend that DATS update password requirements and destroy sensitive information in accordance with City policy to better safeguard City data.

While the Auditor's findings did not identify any instances of data breach - legal non-compliance or inappropriate use of personal information - this recommendation highlights an opportunity to strengthen data security and management. The software that stores sensitive information is only available to staff who deal with files as part of their role and who have approved access. Administration is working with the software vendor to implement an updated password system that would use the users' existing network credentials, which has password complexity and expiration requirements managed by Open City and Technology (OCT). This feature was previously incompatible with the current version of the software database, but has recently become available. This will simplify and streamline the password management process while improving system security.

Regarding the retention of personal information, DATS has processes to destroy physical records, such as medical information, for DATS clients who are no longer actively using the service. However, technical limitations have impeded the ability to delete client data from the software system for inactive clients. OCT is collaborating with the software vendor to implement an automated deletion of records for clients who have been inactive for more than six years. This aligns with existing data retention policies and improves data security by preventing the unnecessary storage of outdated information.

These improvements will be ready for the Auditor to review by December 31, 2025.

Audit Recommendation 3

We recommend that DATS improve how it monitors contractors and apply additional formal controls to help enforce contract terms and conditions.

DATS uses contracted service providers as an important component of on-road service delivery. Contracted service delivers approximately half of DATS trips, provided by a combination of minivans, wheelchair-accessible minivans and taxi sedans. This variety of vehicle types accommodates a diverse range of mobility needs. This approach further increases the service flexibility to efficiently respond to demand while meeting service standards. This approach is aligned with results from the 2019 Program and Service Review and is standard practice across major municipal paratransit agencies.

DATS contractors are provided with training materials to ensure all drivers receive a high level of rider service training. The DATS Contract Coordinator works closely with contractors to adjust resource levels to meet service needs while resolving any service issues or concerns. The Contract Coordinator meets weekly with contracted service providers to review performance metrics, trends and plan service needs. All contracted service vehicles are equipped with tablets that relay all necessary information to help complete trips. DATS' dispatchers continuously monitor service throughout the day and are in constant contact with drivers while they are on the road.

Based on preliminary findings from the audit, Administration has responded by implementing monthly reviews to ensure service checks and vehicle inspections are being appropriately

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documented. The DATS Contract Coordinator now maintains a log of all site visits and training audits conducted. These changes have been implemented.

Service assessments for contractor performance thresholds will be formally reviewed and contracts will be amended to reflect best practice. This is expected to be implemented and ready for the Auditor to review by September 30, 2025.

Audit Recommendation 4

We recommend that DATS have a second individual review and approve contractor assessments and invoices to reduce errors.

DATS staff prepare a monthly payment report for contracted services. This report is generated from the paratransit software to confirm the amount of service delivered. This report is reviewed by the Contract Coordinator prior to being entered into the City's Ariba payment software to generate monthly payments that are matched to contractor invoices.

DATS is amending the internal payment approval process in the procurement and invoice management system to require a second formal approver for monthly payments. Administration will document and adjust the processes of contractor assessments to include a secondary review of contractor invoicing for the Auditor to review by December 31, 2025.

Audit Recommendation 5

We recommend that DATS improve its strategic planning by:

- *Enhancing its performance measurement framework to include clearly defined goals, measures and targets to achieve its mission and vision.*
- *Conducting regular risk assessments at the paratransit level to identify and address relevant risks.*

Administration currently tracks and monitors more than 100 operational performance metrics. These metrics are compiled and reviewed on a monthly basis to identify any trends that may require planning and action. Key operational metrics such as trip volumes and on-time performance are reviewed in daily operations meetings. Long-term risks are discussed and addressed through planning around process innovation and service enhancement.

Opportunities exist to build more formal targets, including reporting for key performance indicators and tracking and reporting on paratransit-specific risks. Administration will document clearly defined goals, measures and targets, and better integrate these in Enterprise Performance Management processes within the Edmonton Transit Service branch.

Risk registers have been completed at the branch level within City Administration, and not at the subservice (conventional transit; paratransit) level within Edmonton Transit Service. In response to the Auditor's recommendation, Administration will establish a paratransit-specific risk register and the implementation of annual risk register exercises.

These actions will be ready for the Auditor to review by September 30, 2025.

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Audit Recommendation 6

We recommend that DATS regularly review its service model to optimize value for money and service quality.

DATS' current service model fully leverages its existing in-house garage and fleet capacity as well as Operator Full Time Equivalent pool to deliver base service. In-house service is delivered with buses equipped with lifts, and these vehicles are able to accommodate most of DATS' clients with wheelchairs or other non-ambulatory mobility aids. Contracted service supplements in-house service to allow for fluctuating trip demand to deliver service in a cost effective and flexible manner to meet DATS clients needs.

Numerous enhancements in the DATS service model have been implemented in recent years, including the addition of contracts with major taxi companies and technology and process enhancements to facilitate more timely and flexible resource deployment to meet service needs. These innovations helped DATS adapt to unprecedented fluctuations in trip volume due to the COVID-19 pandemic in a nimble and cost effective manner. This resulted in cost savings throughout the pandemic.

With planned expansion of ETS garage facilities, opportunities exist to review the DATS service model. Administration will document the scope and process for a paratransit service design review that will be completed every four years prior to the City of Edmonton's four year business and budget planning cycle. This will be ready for the Auditor to review by December 31, 2025.

Audit Recommendation 7

We recommend that DATS implement data validation controls and a data quality assurance process, to regularly review data accuracy and completeness to help make evidence-informed decisions.

The audit process identified a number of data management issues that can be addressed to improve reporting for the service. DATS is working on process improvements to allow for better tracking, analysis and identification of recurring issues. Quality assurance enhancements will focus on data that is used for strategic and operational decision making such as key performance metrics and categorization of client commendations, concerns and inquiries. Administration will document and implement data validation controls and a data quality assurance process. This work will be ready for the Auditor to review by September 30, 2025.

Audit Recommendation 8

We recommend DATS update its training materials and formally track training completion to equip staff with the necessary skills and knowledge to provide excellent service.

Operational teams are equipped with extensive on-the-job training to equip them with the knowledge and skills required to deliver a high level of service to DATS clients. Process changes are communicated to teams and incorporated into on-the-job training.

To help ensure the effectiveness of training programs, Administration will document and implement a process to ensure training materials are kept up-to-date. This will include establishing timelines for regular reviews and revisions. Administration will also document and implement a process for tracking changes to Standard Operating Procedures. This will facilitate

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the timely update of training materials to reflect any modifications to operational procedures and best practices. As well, Administration will document a process to formally track training completion. This work will be ready for the Auditor to review by December 31, 2025.

Community Insight

Administration collects feedback from DATS riders through various channels, including 311, community engagement and rider support contacts. An annual rider satisfaction survey, conducted through online, telephone, and mail-in methods, provides valuable insights into rider experiences.

In 2024, 320 DATS riders and caregivers participated in the annual survey, increasing from 270 participants in 2023. Overall satisfaction with DATS was at 87 per cent. Satisfaction was highest for aspects such as assistance from the DATS Operator, DATS service operating hours, booking processes, cleanliness of the vehicles, comfort and safety on-board. Areas of improvement included pick-up windows, on-time performance, trip duration, and pick-up/drop-off notifications.

Opportunities to further enhance the rider experience for DATS clients, developed with consideration to the feedback received from the DATS Rider Satisfaction Survey and the DATS Advisory Group, were outlined in the September 17, 2024, City Operations report CO02352. The options also aligned with the findings from the rider engagement activities related to the Program and Service Review.

GBA+

ETS is committed to equitable transit access for all riders, regardless of income, age, ability or other personal factors. Across North America, transit services include conventional transit as well as paratransit service for those who cannot use conventional service.

Transportation plays a critical role in facilitating social inclusion in communities, including paratransit service for persons with disabilities. DATS provides essential transportation for Edmontonians including riders who may represent several identity factors in equity seeking groups. These riders may face multiple barriers to meeting their basic needs and an inclusive paratransit service can be a critical enabler of a better life. The design and delivery of paratransit service incorporates principles of gender-based analysis plus (GBA+) to ensure inclusivity.

People with mobility challenges and other disabilities are more likely to be impacted by transportation barriers which can limit their use of public transit service and reduce their independence, mobility and access to other essential services.

This audit will improve the management of DATS to ensure resources, staff training and administrative processes are refined to better serve the diverse needs of all riders when planning and delivering transit service.

Attachments

1. DATS Program Service Enhancement Plan Update
2. DATS Trip Volume 2019 - 2024
3. DATS Audit Recommendations and Actions Summary