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Highways & Transportation Committee

20 July 2023

**FlexiLink Demand Responsive
Transport Service – Public Consultation**

Report of: Tom Moody, Director of Infrastructure and Highways

Report Reference No: HTC/12/23-24

Ward(s) Affected: All

Purpose of Report

- 1 FlexiLink is a demand responsive bus service which operates across the borough and is funded by the Council as part of the supported bus network. Over the last 9 months, the Council have been reviewing the efficiency and effectiveness of the service in relation to the Council's Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) and in light of the wider changes across the bus network as a whole in Cheshire East.
- 2 The purpose of the report is to update Committee on the key findings of the review so far and seek approval to launch a public consultation on a series of options to improve the service. It is essential that the views of existing service users, residents and stakeholders are understood and reflected in the final proposals, which will be presented to Committee early in 2024.

Executive Summary

- 3 The bus network in Cheshire East plays a key role in providing access to jobs and services and connecting people and places. Local bus services support the delivery of the Council's strategic priorities for economic growth, environmental sustainability, social inclusion and health and wellbeing.
- 4 The majority of the Council's supported bus services are conventional fixed route services operating to a specified timetable. FlexiLink is different as it provides a demand responsive transport (DRT) solution. The Department for Transport (DfT) define DRT as a flexible service

that provides shared transport to users who specify their desired location and time of pick-up and drop-off. DRT services run without a set timetable and typically use smaller vehicles than fixed route bus services.

- 5 FlexiLink is the only DRT service funded by the Council as part of the supported bus network. There is a second DRT service in operation in the south of the borough, which is funded by the DfT Rural Mobility Fund – it is a 3 year pilot project branded ‘go-too’. The focus of this report is the FlexiLink service, whilst drawing on lessons learnt so far from the pilot project.
- 6 To be eligible to use the FlexiLink service, residents must be aged 80 or over, have a disability, or live beyond the reach of any other public transport. The service is booked by telephone and offers a personalised, door to door service. FlexiLink operates in a similar way to a traditional ‘Dial-a-Ride’ service, and consequently 99% of passengers are concessionary pass holders who travel free of charge.
- 7 There is a fleet of 10 vehicles to provide the FlexiLink service, which integrates with the provision of home to school transport for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Therefore, the core hours of operation for FlexiLink are between 0930 and 1430 Monday to Friday.
- 8 Ansa Transport, who operate both FlexiLink and go-too, have developed marketing and promotional material to improve awareness and increase the use of both DRT services. This is considered to be a first step in a programme to develop a comprehensive travel app covering all passenger transport modes.
- 9 Over the last 9 months, the Council has been undertaking a detailed analysis of operational data for the FlexiLink service to understand how the service has been performing, with an assessment of efficiency, affordability and value for money.
- 10 The review has identified a number of significant challenges, including low levels of demand, under-utilised vehicles and often inefficient vehicle deployment due to a lack of automated routing and scheduling software. A summary of the data review is included in the ‘Background’ section of the report.
- 11 To address the challenges, a series of options are proposed including:
 - Expanding the eligibility criteria to serve a wider population
 - Expanding the operating hours and days
 - Improve integration with the mainstream network (i.e. feeder service)

- Modernising the booking and scheduling system
- Introducing a new fare structure, including a charge for concessionary pass holders.

- 12 The next stage of work is to carry out a public consultation to understand the transport needs of service users, residents and stakeholders and seek their views on the proposals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Highways and Transportation Committee is recommended to:

1. Note the review of the Council's FlexiLink bus service.
2. Approve the proposal to launch a public consultation to seek the views of service users, residents and stakeholders.
3. Approve the Consultation & Engagement Plan (see Appendix 1).
4. Delegate approval of the consultation material for publication to the Director of Infrastructure and Highways who will make all necessary arrangements to undertake public consultation.

Background

National Bus Strategy – Bus Back Better

- 13 The DfT National Bus Strategy (published in March 2021) sets out a long-term strategy for buses in England and recognises the role that demand responsive transport services can play, particular in lower-density rural areas where there are less concentrated levels of demand.
- 14 The advance in technology is enabling demand responsive services to compete with the attractiveness and flexibility of the car, by offering more personal, on-demand service, taking people from their doors, or closer to their doors, than a regular bus.
- 15 The strategy recognises that demand responsive services are not a perfect solution to every challenge. Several of the large operators have tried and failed to operate them commercially. They must strike a balance: on the one hand, providing a service which is responsive and frequent enough to be useful and on the other, not running too much mileage, with little environmental advantage over the car. It is recognised that demand responsive services will never replace frequent urban and inter-urban routes, as too many vehicles would be needed.
- 16 The DfT expect all demand responsive services to be fully integrated with the mainstream network and that they will be provided using

accessible vehicles, including provision for wheelchair users. The strategy sets out a commitment to improving connectivity of isolated rural communities and those with infrequent and unreliable services.

- 17 Through the £20m Rural Mobility Fund, the DfT have awarded funding to 17 pilot projects to trial innovative demand responsive solutions to transport challenges faced by rural areas, including Cheshire East.

DfT Rural Mobility Fund – Pilot Project

- 18 The Council were successful in securing £1.26m from the DfT Rural Mobility Fund to trial a demand responsive service in the rural area to the south and west of Nantwich. The 'go-too' service launched in October 2021 and is in the second year of a three-year pilot project which is due to end in October 2024.
- 19 The go-too service is open to all residents in the target area and the service operates Monday to Saturday from 7am until 9pm. The standard fare is £3 per journey or £2 for concessionary passholders. The service is provided with two vehicles. More information on the service is available at www.go-too.co.uk
- 20 The Council are continuously monitoring the go-too service to review performance, develop marketing and promotional campaigns, capture lessons learnt and adapt where necessary. The key findings are that:
- The go-too brand has a strong identity in the target area
 - The service has developed a growing base of core users
 - High quality vehicles support the attractiveness of the offer
 - The app-based booking system is popular with service users
 - The scheduling and route optimisation technology support the efficiency of the service and utilisation of vehicles
 - The most popular days of operation are Friday and Saturday.
- 21 The priority for the next stage of development of the service is to increase the number of service users and increase the average number of passengers per journey. Ansa Transport, who operate the service on behalf of the Council, have developed a Marketing and Communications Plan to encourage the greatest possible uptake of the service over the remainder of the pilot period up to October 2024.

Cheshire East Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP)

- 22 The Council's BSIP (published in October 2021) recognises the potential to move beyond the delivery of a traditional model of delivering bus services. The plan identifies that Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) is an option which is intended to 'fill the gaps' in the network

where it is a more appropriate solution for bus service delivery and where it offers value for money.

- 23 The plan recognises that DRT works particularly well within rural areas (or at the urban fringe) as it more efficiently able to directly serve hard to reach locations and areas of isolation. However, the intention is that DRT should not be limited to rural areas alone, and in the BSIP, town connections have also been considered to strengthen the bus network and public transport availability across Cheshire East.
- 24 The BSIP has looked at metrics for bus usage across the borough and has identified six potential areas where DRT could offer a potential solution – northwest of Knutsford, surrounding Wilmslow, south and west of Macclesfield, east of Macclesfield, northwest of Crewe and south east of Crewe. Unfortunately, the Council did not secure DfT funding to deliver any roll-out of DRT solutions.

FlexiLink – Data Analysis

- 25 The FlexiLink service is operated using a booking system which has very limited functionality for performance monitoring and reporting. The routing and scheduling of the vehicles is done manually and therefore the only source of information on what journeys the vehicles are undertaking is to revert to the daily driver run sheets.
- 26 To provide an overview of FlexiLink operations, driver run sheets were analysed for sample period between June 2022 and March 2023. The key findings from the data analysis are listed below:
- Vehicle Utilisation – Of the 10 vehicles available in the FlexiLink fleet, 7 vehicles operate across the borough and only 6 tend to operate on a Monday. The vehicles are not fully utilised due to the low levels of demand for the service. Currently, if telephone bookings are not made, there is no reason to deploy the vehicles. In 2022, driver shortages also contributed to reduced vehicle deployment.
 - Average number of passengers per journey – The vehicles have a maximum of 16 seats, although many of the vehicles are configured for wheelchair users and therefore have lower seating capacity. To understand the vehicle occupancy levels, the driver run sheets have been analysed to establish the average number of passengers on a vehicle per journey. Across the borough, the average number of passengers per journey is 4 – with geographical variations set out in the table below. This provides an indication of the efficient use of vehicles.

Geographical Area	Average number of passengers per journey
FT2 – Macclesfield/Poynton/Disley	2.24
FT3 – Sandbach/Haslington/Alsager/Middlewich	4.39
FT4 – Crewe & Nantwich Area	3.69
FT5 – Knutsford/Handforth Dean/Wilmslow	6.25
Boroughwide	4

- Geographical Distribution – 70% of vehicles operate in areas in the south of the borough (FT3 and FT4) and 30% operate in the north of the borough (FT2 and FT5).
- Membership & Eligibility – To use the FlexiLink service, passengers must register and undertake a screening for eligibility. There are currently 466 registered users of the FlexiLink service and the majority qualify based on age (see table below).

Eligibility Criteria	Number	Proportion
Aged 80 or over	339	73%
Disability	79	17%
No other bus service	48	10%
Total Members	466	100%

Note – not all members will be active users of the service

- Journey Purpose – At the point of making a booking, passengers are asked the purpose of their journey. 68% of journeys are for shopping, 20% for clubs / day centres and 6% social. Analysis of the driver run sheets found that the majority (88%) of journeys are regular bookings which are repeated at regular intervals (e.g. weekly) and 12% are ad hoc journeys.
- Passenger Numbers – FlexiLink was launched in August 2019 with nearly 5,000 passenger journeys in the first month of operation. Between August 2019 and February 2020, the monthly journeys had fallen by 30%. In March 2020, the service was suspended during the Covid-19 pandemic. In August 2020 when the service was reinstated, passenger numbers were significantly lower (-85%) compared to when the service launched. Whilst there has been a slow recovery in

passenger numbers, monthly figures during Q3 2022 were approx. 50% lower than pre-covid patronage.

- Concessionary Travel – The table below illustrates that 99% of FlexiLink passengers are concessionary pass holders and travel free on the service. Only 1% of passengers are paying the standard fare of £3. During 2022/23, the revenue collected on FlexiLink was £837.

Total number of trips 2022/23	26,658
Number of fare paying trips 2022/23	279
Number of concessionary trips 2022/23	26,379
Fare Box Revenue 2022/23	£837

- Cost per passenger journey – As passenger numbers fall, this has a direct impact on the cost per journey of the service. Vehicle occupancy is often low which in-turn contributes to a high cost per passenger journey as vehicles are transporting small numbers and often a single passenger per journey. However, it is recognised that cost per passenger journey is a crude measure that does not reflect the wider social value of the service, in terms of enabling independence and reducing social isolation.

27 The data analysis has found that FlexiLink has low levels of demand, low vehicle utilisation and often inefficient vehicle deployment due to a lack of automated routing and scheduling software. There is significant scope to improve and modernise the service in line with the Council’s wider ambitions for demand responsive transport, as set out in the BSIP.

Consultation and Engagement

- 28 A period of public consultation and stakeholder engagement is proposed to understand the transport needs of existing service users, residents and stakeholders, and seek their views on the proposals to change the FlexiLink service. It is proposed to launch the consultation in early August for an 8 week period until the end of September 2023.
- 29 A Consultation & Engagement Plan has been developed in conjunction with the Council’s Research & Consultation Team and is included as Appendix 1. The draft questionnaire which will be used to gather data and evidence is included as part of the plan.
- 30 The Council will engage with bus operators and user groups through the Enhanced Partnership Board and Forum. Within the Forum, all bus

operators who operate within the Cheshire East Enhanced Partnership Plan and Scheme area will be invited to participate, ensuring that the whole industry have an opportunity to input to the consultation.

- 31 The Equality Impact Assessment has identified a number of organisations who can help represent the views of those with protected characteristics to ensure their views are reflected in the consultation.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 32 Before implementing any changes to a transport service, it is important to conduct thorough research and analysis to understand the transport needs of the target community.

- 33 This should include:

- understanding the existing bus service provision
- identifying transportation gaps
- assessing demand for DRT services.

- 34 The programme of work also includes the need to learn from comparable authorities through benchmarking and reviewing best practice from other DRT services operating nationwide.

- 35 A period of public consultation is recommended to ensure the FlexiLink service continues to serve its intended purpose while identifying opportunities for service modernisation and quality enhancement.

Other Options Considered

- 36 The alternative option is to do nothing and continue with the existing FlexiLink service. However, in its current form, passenger numbers would continue to be relatively low and the service would become increasingly unsustainable and unaffordable.

- 37 Removal of this service would leave vulnerable users, such as those with disabilities and/or over the age of 80, without access to a service that they depend upon. The loss of this service would have an adverse effect on social inclusion, health and wellbeing and environmental sustainability which are all priorities within the Corporate Plan.

Option	Impact	Risk
Do Nothing	No changes to the current FlexiLink operations.	Passenger numbers will remain low. Cost per passenger journey will remain high and the service will not be financially sustainable.

Implications and Comments

Monitoring Officer/Legal

- 38 The Local Transport Plan 2019 sets out an action:
 “Action 6.4 – We will look to maximise the availability and usage of the flexible transport service within the budget available”
- 39 Members must be fully aware of the equalities implications of the decisions they are taking. This will ensure that there is proper appreciation of any potential impact of any decision on the Council’s statutory obligations under the Public Sector Equality Duty. As a minimum, this requires decision makers to carefully consider the content of any Equality Impact Assessments produced by officers.
- 40 In developing proposals for supported bus services, including demand responsive transport, the Council must have regard to the transport needs of all the residents in the borough. The consultation will provide an opportunity to seek the views of more vulnerable groups, including older people, people with disabilities or mobility problems and parents/carers with young children. Development of plans will need to be in accordance with statutory and legal requirements for public consultation, stakeholder engagement and Equalities Impact Assessment.

Section 151 Officer/Finance

- 41 The Council’s supported bus budget for 2023/24 is £2,470,396, which funds the provision of fixed route bus services and FlexiLink. The budget for FlexiLink is included in the Ansa Transport Management Fee and is £451,518 – this is approximately 18% of the Council’s overall budget for supported bus services.
- 42 The costs of the public consultation and stakeholder engagement will be funded through the transport policy budget. A review of the outcomes of

this consultation will be undertaken by Council staff in the Strategic Transport & Parking Service and therefore funded through existing staffing budgets.

Policy

- 43 The Local Transport Plan (2019-2024) outlines the role transport will play in supporting the long-term goals to improve the economy, protect the environment and make attractive places to live and work. FlexiLink plays a part in achieving these goals, by delivering social, economic and environmental benefits.
- 44 Cheshire East’s Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) sets out the ambition for the bus network to improve the speed, reliability and quality of public transport, to encourage more residents to choose bus, make fewer car journeys and contribute to carbon reduction targets. A modernised FlexiLink service will help to encourage bus use and provide an alternative to the private car, generating congestion and carbon reduction benefits.
- 45 The FlexiLink review, public consultation and stakeholder engagement will support the following Corporate Plan priorities:

An open and enabling organisation	A council which empowers and cares about people	A thriving and sustainable place
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that there is transparency in all aspects of council decision making • Listen, learn and respond to our residents, promoting opportunities for a two-way conversation • Support a sustainable financial future for the council, through service development, improvement and transformation • Promote and develop the services of the council through regular communication and engagement with all residents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work together with our residents and partners to support people and communities to be strong and resilient • Reduce health inequalities across the borough 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A great place for people to live, work and visit • Welcoming, safe and clean neighbourhoods • To reduce the impact on our environment • A transport network that is safe and promotes active travel • Thriving urban and rural economies with opportunities for all • To be carbon neutral by 2025

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

- 46 The Council will ensure the equality implications of the proposed changes are fully evaluated through an Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA). A draft EqIA is appended to this report (see Appendix 2).
- 47 As part of the consultation and stakeholder engagement process, discussions will be held with representative groups, including Cheshire Centre for Independent Living and Cheshire Eye Society.

Human Resources

- 48 There are no direct implications for Human Resources.

Risk Management

- 49 A risk register for the project has been developed and will be kept up to date. In terms of governance and corporate oversight, a Project Board has been established including colleagues from key enabling services, namely Research & Consultation and Communications. This will ensure that the process of undertaking public consultation is robust.

Rural Communities

- 50 Demand responsive transport services can have an important role to play in lower-density rural areas where there are less concentrated levels of demand for public transport. The Corporate Plan outlines targets to reduce areas of the borough not served by public transport. The Council has demonstrated a commitment to this through the successful bid for DfT funding as part of the Rural Mobility Fund and subsequent operation of the pilot Go-too service. The consultation will help understand the extent to which the FlexiLink proposals will support accessibility in rural communities.

Children and Young People including Cared for Children, care leavers and Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

- 51 The Corporate Plan outlines the significant pressures in Children's Services, particularly placements for looked after children and services for children with SEND, including home to school transport. A significant number of school children across the borough use buses to access educational establishments.
- 52 FlexiLink integrates with home to school transport provision for children with SEND and the proposals in this report do not impact on that integration. The FlexiLink proposals do not seek to change the provision for home to school transport and any proposals to enhance FlexiLink

services will be considered alongside the ongoing home to school transport review led by the Children and Young People's Directorate.

Public Health

- 53 There are pockets of deprivation in Cheshire East related to income, health and life chances. Bus services enable a greater proportion of residents to access important services, such as health care facilities. FlexiLink supports independent living, social inclusion and helps to reduce health inequalities across the borough.
- 54 During the consultation period, engagement will include conversations with council services for Learning & Disabilities, Live Well for Longer and adult social care teams to consider any service priorities that can be addressed during the design of options for Flexilink.

Climate Change

- 55 Cheshire East Council have committed to be carbon neutral in its own operations by 2025. Additionally, the Council have committed to becoming a carbon neutral borough by 2045, which will include measures to decarbonise transport. For demand responsive transport (DRT) services, the advance in technology is enabling DRT to compete with the attractiveness and flexibility of the car which may contribute to carbon reduction targets.

Access to Information	
Contact Officer:	Richard Hibbert, Head of Strategic Transport & Parking richard.hibbert@cheshireeast.gov.uk
Appendices:	Appendix 1 – Consultation & Engagement Plan Appendix 2 – Equality Impact Assessment
Background Papers:	Cheshire East Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP)