

Appendix 1: Consultation, Engagement and Communications Plan

Name of engagement / consultation activity:	FlexiLink – Public Consultation
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Project service / team:	Strategic Transport

Service Area Input:
Strategic Transport & Parking
Adult Social Care
Children & Families
Research & Consultation
Communications
Legal
Finance

Version control:			
Version	Author	Date	Description
V6	CT	10/07/2023	Consultation, Engagement & Communications Plan

Project purpose and background

An explanation of the issues and the purpose of the project, key information to set the scene

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.

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.

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 plan is the FlexiLink service, whilst drawing on lessons learnt so far from the pilot project.

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.

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.

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. 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.

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.

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.

Project Strategic Objectives

What the key strategic objectives of the project are, and how these relate to the corporate plan

The strategic objective of this project is to improve the effectiveness, efficiency, affordability and sustainability of the FlexiLink service. FlexiLink supports the delivery of Local Transport Plan objectives and Corporate Plan priorities in providing access to services, particularly for older people and people with disabilities.

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. This should include:

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

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. 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.

The consultation objectives are:

- To present potential options for the FlexiLink service
- To provide data and supporting information to outline why these options have been developed
- To generate a questionnaire that enables feedback from residents and key stakeholders regarding the options, to help inform decision making.

Engagement approach

A description of the engagement approach to be used, describing the various engagement stages and methods

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 2023 for an 8-week period until the end of September 2023.

It is recognised that this consultation will take place partly during the summer holidays, so there is a need for reminders to be sent at the beginning of the school year (during September) and a minimum of 2 weeks will be given to allow for responses after this reminder has been sent (this will be sent to all stakeholders likely to be impacted by the school holiday period).

It is important for the Council to be open and transparent on the purpose of the consultation, which is to propose a set of solutions to modernise the FlexiLink service and ensure its sustainability and continued operation. The draft questionnaire which will be used to gather data and evidence is included as an Annex to this Consultation Plan.

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.

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.

Stakeholders and methods

A summary of the people and groups you want to engage / consult with from your stakeholder analysis including impacted groups from your equality impact assessment. The methods you will use to gather information, based on the best ways to target your key audiences or impacted groups

Stakeholder	Method	What stage
CEC Members	Email correspondence	Pre-consultation stage
Town & Parish Councils	Email correspondence	Consultation stage
CEC Residents	Press release / social media – questionnaire	Consultation stage
Bus Operators	Enhanced Partnership Board & Forum (see below)	Consultation stage
Bus User Groups	Focus group	Consultation stage
Special Schools: Park Lane; Springfield; Church Lawton; Adelaide; Adelaide Heath Academy; The Axis Academy	Focus groups	Consultation stage
Adult Social Care Partnership Boards	Board meetings	Consultation stage
Disability Information Bureau (DIB)	Focus group	Consultation stage
Cheshire Disabled People's Panel	Focus group	Consultation stage
FlexiLink Passenger Groups: Jubilee House - The Wishing Well Project Union Street – Dementia Group	Focus group	Consultation stage

Lifestyle Centre, Crewe – Exercise group		
Cheshire Centre for Independent Living and Cheshire Eye Society	Focus group	Consultation stage
Age UK	Focus group	Consultation stage
Enhanced Partnership Board <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chair of H&T Committee • Deputy Chair of H&T Committee • Head of Highways • Head of Strategic Transport & Parking • 1x Large Operator • 2x Small Operators 	Board meeting – July	Pre-consultation stage
Enhanced Partnership Forum <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All local bus operators • Community Transport Operators • CEC Members • Bus User Groups • Train Operating companies • Other Statutory consultees • Healthcare and education • Police • Chamber of Commerce • Neighbouring Authorities & LEP • Traffic Commissioner 	Forum meeting – September	Consultation stage
Transport Focus – National Representative Body of Bus Users	Meeting/discussion	Consultation stage

Activity plan

The time to take for each stage including preparation, live engagement / consultation, analysis phase and feedback phase

Activity	Who / team responsible	Estimated date / timescales
<i>e.g., Draft questions</i>	<i>e.g., John Smith, Public health</i>	<i>e.g Before 10th June</i>
Draft consultation questions and supporting documents		
Review and feedback of consultation questions and supporting documents	Strategic Transport	May/June/July 2023

Design paper copies of the questionnaire		
Finalise consultation questions and supporting documents / sign off		
Send paper copies to print / distribute to libraries		
Conduct Public Consultation	Strategic Transport	Early August – end of September 2023
Analysis and Feedback	Consultation Team	October 2023
Develop proposals	Strategic Transport	November 2023 – Spring 2024

Communication plan

Communications tactics to promote the engagement / consultation

Activity	Audience	Channel	Date timescale /	Aim Messages /	Who
Press Release	Residents and wider stakeholders	Issued to all media	August 2023	Inform residents & outline the purpose of the consultation	Media Team/Rhiannon Hilton
Social Media	Residents and wider stakeholders	CEC corporate accounts and ANSA Transport	August-September 2023	Inform residents & outline the purpose of the consultation	Media Team/Rhiannon Hilton
Ward Members	All ward members	Email	August 2023	Inform Ward Members of the consultation	Media Team/Strategic Transport
Town and Parish Councils	All Town and Parish Council's	Email	August 2023	Inform Town & Parish Councils of consultation	Strategic Transport
Bus Operators	All bus operators	Email	August 2023	Inform Operators of the consultation	Strategic Transport
Bus User Groups	All bus user groups	Email	August 2023	Inform user groups of the consultation	Strategic Transport
Other key Stakeholders	All key stakeholders	Email	August 2023	Inform key stakeholders	Strategic Transport

				of the consultation	
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Analysis, Reporting and feedback

How will analysis be carried out / how will the draft feedback be reported and shared with participants.

Analysis tools and expertise required:	Data analysis in excel / senior consultation officer required
Reporting required:	Full reporting of consultation findings
Public feedback methods:	Report to be published on the consultation web pages

Budget and Resource

What funding and resources do you need in order to successfully deliver the plan?

Budget / costs:	TBC – Transport Policy Revenue Budget (printing and promotion)
Resources:	Strategic Transport Team, R&C Team, Communications

Risk Assessment

What are the anticipated risks and mitigations?

Risk	Mitigation
Public not understanding the purpose of the consultation / inability to interpret	Use of plain English
Wording/jargon is too technical	Use of plain English
Consultation material too lengthy	Keep consultation questions short and concise
Not getting consultation started by August 2023	Weekly project plan, key milestones identified with sufficient lead in time built in.
Limited responses to the consultation	Communications and promotions to encourage responses. Ensure consultation material is engaging. Regular stakeholder engagement to keep interested parties engage.
Influx of paper consultation responses	Back up admin officers for inputting of the paper responses.

Appendix 1: Draft Consultation Questions

FlexiLink: Service Proposals

Introduction

What is FlexiLink?

FlexiLink is a flexible bus service that provides shared transport to users who specify their desired location and time of pick-up and drop-off. FlexiLink provides access to key services and amenities (shopping and health services) for those residents who are eligible:

- The service is available to those who are aged 80+, have a disability, or live beyond the reach of any other public transport
- The current fare is £3 per journey or free if you have a concessionary bus pass
- The core hours of the service are between 9.30am and 2.30pm Monday to Friday
- The FlexiLink service currently picks service users up from their own home
- All journeys must be pre-booked at least 48 hours in advance via telephone

Purpose of this consultation

Cheshire East Council are currently reviewing the FlexiLink service to understand how the service has been performing, with an assessment of efficiency, affordability and value for money.

The review so far has identified a number of significant challenges, including low levels of demand, under-utilised vehicles and often inefficient vehicle use due to a lack of automated routing and scheduling software. We have therefore identified a set of potential proposals to expand & improve the service, ensuring it is more efficient, cost effective and sustainable.

The draft proposals in summary are:

- Make the service available to more age groups and regardless of ability so that more residents can use the service
- Introduce a new fare structure to improve cost effectiveness of the service
- Move to designated pick-up points to improve efficiency of the service

As part of this process we are also:

- Reviewing the operating hours of the service to see how feasible it is to cater for more journeys
- Improving the booking system so that users are able to book onto the service online / via an app as well as by telephone
- Providing an option to connect to existing bus and rail services to enable onward journeys

Please review the supporting documents for further information and background on this review / the draft proposals [[LINK Supporting document](#)]

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Submitting your comments

Please submit your consultation response by 30 September 2023 by completing this questionnaire.

For any queries about this consultation, e.g. if you would like to receive this questionnaire in an alternative format or submit your response in a different way, please email the Research and Consultation team RandC@cheshireeast.gov.uk. If you do not have email access please call Customer Services on 0300 123 55 00 who will send the response on your behalf.

Once the consultation closes we will analyse all responses, produce a summary report of them, and publish this online on our [consultation results webpage](#).

Your confidentiality is assured

Any personal information you supply will be used in line with the latest Data Protection legislation. To find out more about how we use your information please see our [privacy policy](#).

About you

**1. Which of the following best describes how you are responding to this consultation:
Please select one option only**

- As an individual (e.g. local resident)
- As a local bus operator
- On behalf of a group, organisation or club
- On behalf of a local business
- As an elected Cheshire East Ward Councillor, or Town/Parish Councillor
- Other (please write in):

**2. If you wish to, please give the name and postcode of the local bus operator, group, organisation, club or business you are responding on behalf of:
Please write in below**

Name of local bus operator, group, organisation, club or business:

Postcode:

**3. Do you currently use the FlexiLink service?
Please select one option only**

- Yes

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No

4. Do you have or are you eligible for a concessionary travel pass?

Please select one option only

Yes

No

5. On average, how often do you use the FlexiLink transport service?

Please select one option only

Five days a week

Two to four days a week

Once a week

Once a fortnight

Once a month

Less often than once a month

Eligibility

Currently the FlexiLink service is available to those who are aged 80+, have a disability, or live beyond the reach of any other public transport. We are proposing to make the service available to more age groups and regardless of ability so that more residents can use the service. Journeys would be offered on a first come first served basis.

6. To what extent do agree or disagree with the proposal to make the service available to more age groups and regardless of ability?

Please select one option only

Strongly agree	Tend to Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to Disagree	Strongly disagree	Unsure / don't know
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

7. Which age groups should be able to use FlexiLink?

Please select one option only

Open to all (no age restrictions)

Include young adults (16-25) & those within the state pension age (currently 66 and over)

Include those within the state pension age (currently 66 and over)

Only those aged 80+

Other (please specify):

Fares

The current FlexiLink fare is £3 per journey or free if you have a concessionary bus pass. Following an increase in operating costs and to ensure the future cost-effectiveness of the service we are proposing to introduce a fare for concessionary pass holders including elderly people and disabled people.

8. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to introduce a fare for concessionary pass holders?

Strongly agree Tend to agree Neither agree nor disagree Tend to disagree Strongly disagree Unsure / don't know

9. How much do you think the FlexiLink fare should be for concessionary passholders? Please select one option only

- £3 per journey (flat fare for all passengers)
- £2 per journey (discounted for concessionary pass holders)
- Other (please specify):

10. Do you think that we should offer a discounted fare for those under 16?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure / don't know

Pick up location

In general, FlexiLink currently picks service users up from their own home (door-to-door service). We are proposing to move to designated pick-up points to improve efficiency of the service. Passengers will be directed to their nearest pick-up-point. A door-to-door service may still be available for those with restricted mobility.

11. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to...?

Please select one option only

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree
...move to designated pick-up points?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...continue to offer home pick-up for those with restricted ability?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

12. How far would you be willing to travel to get to the designated pick-up point?

Please select one option only

- Up to a quarter of a mile (400m), around 5 minutes' walk
- Up to one half of a mile (800m), around 10 minutes' walk
- Up to three quarters of a mile (1000m), around 20 minutes' walk
- Other (please specify):

Operating days / hours

FlexiLink operates between 9.30am and 2.30pm Monday to Friday. We are unable to offer transport before 09:30 and from 2:30pm until 4:00pm on a weekday due to our commitments supporting home to school travel. We are keen to understand what the demand would be if we were to extend the operating hours and/or days of the service.

13. What days of the week would you prefer to use FlexiLink?

Please select all that apply

- Monday
- Tuesday
- Wednesday
- Thursday
- Friday
- Saturday
- Sunday

14. Which time of day would you prefer to travel on FlexiLink?

Please select all that apply

- Weekday (09:00-14:30)
- Weekday PM Peak (16:00-18:00)
- Weekday Evening (18:00-23:00)
- Saturday (07:00-21:00)
- Sunday (09:00-18:00)

Booking platform

Currently all journeys need to be pre-booked via telephone at least 48 hours in advance. We are looking to improve the booking system so that passengers are able to pre-book the service online / by app as well as by telephone.

15. Which method are you most likely to use to book onto FlexiLink?

Please select one option only

- Telephone booking
- Web booking
- Mobile App

Impact of the proposals

16. How will the proposed changes have an impact on the way you use FlexiLink?

Please select one option only

- I will start using the FlexiLink service (if don't currently use)
- I will use the FlexiLink service more often
- I will not change how I use the FlexiLink service (will continue to use my normal mode of travel if don't currently use)
- I will continue to use the FlexiLink service but less frequently
- I will have to stop using the FlexiLink service
- Unsure / don't know

17. What would you most like to use FlexiLink for?

Please select up to THREE options only

- Travelling to/from shops to do essential shopping (e.g. food shopping)
- Travelling to/from shops to do non-essential shopping
- Travelling to/from a place of work
- Health appointments such as visiting the hospital / doctor / dentist
- Visiting friends/relatives
- Visiting leisure/recreational facilities
- Visiting rural walks / attractions
- Visiting community/day centres
- Connecting to other transport e.g. to train / fixed bus route links
- Other (please specify):

18. In what other ways do you feel the proposed changes will have an impact on you and the way you travel?

Please write in below any positive or negative impacts:

19. Do you have any ideas or suggestions for other ways in which the Council can improve FlexiLink and make it more cost effective?

Please write in below

How you travel

**20. Do you own or use a car?
Please select one option only**

- I have a car available and prefer to drive
- I have a car available but prefer not to drive
- I don't have a car available
- Other (please specify):

**21. How often do you travel by bus (not including FlexiLink or go-too)?
Please select one option only**

- Five or more days a week
- Three or Four days a week
- Once or twice a week
- Once a fortnight
- Once a month
- Not very often
- Not at all

**22. Which town or village would you normally travel to?
Please select all that apply**

- Alderley Edge
- Alsager
- Audlem
- Bollington
- Bunbury
- Chelford
- Congleton
- Crewe
- Disley

- Goostrey
- Handforth
- Haslington
- Holmes Chapel
- Knutsford
- Macclesfield
- Middlewich
- Mobberley
- Nantwich
- Poynton
- Prestbury
- Sandbach
- Shavington
- Wilmslow
- Wrenbury
- Other (please specify):

About you (2)

The following questions are optional. The information you provide will be used to see if there are any differences in views for different groups of people, and to check if services are being delivered in a fair and accessible way. You do not need to answer if you do not wish to.

23. What is your home postcode?

Please write in below

24. What is your gender identity?

Please select one option only

- Male
- Female

- Prefer not to say
- Prefer to self describe (please write in the box below):

25. What age group do you belong to?

Please select one option only

- 16-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65-74
- 75-84
- 85 and over
- Prefer not to say

26. What is your ethnic origin?

Please select one option only

- White English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
- Any other White background
- Mixed or multiple ethnic groups
- Asian / Asian British
- Black African / Caribbean / Black British
- Prefer not to say
- Other (please write in the box below):

27. Which of the following best describes your religious belief / faith?

Please select one option only

- Buddhist
- Christian
- Hindu

- Jewish
- Muslim
- Sikh
- No religion
- Prefer not to say
- Other (please write in the box below):

28. Are your day-to-day activities limited because of a health problem or disability which has lasted, or is expected to last, at least 12 months?

Please select one option only

- Yes, a lot
- Yes, a little
- Not at all
- Prefer not to say

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