

**CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL – EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT FORM**

# EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

**TITLE: FlexiLink Demand Responsive Transport Service Public Consultation**

## VERSION CONTROL

| <b>Date</b>       | <b>Version</b> | <b>Author</b>       | <b>Description of Changes</b>     |
|-------------------|----------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <b>11/05/2023</b> | <b>1</b>       | <b>Chris Taylor</b> | <b>N/A</b>                        |
| <b>19/05/2023</b> | <b>2</b>       | <b>Chris Taylor</b> | <b>Update following PC review</b> |
| <b>24/05/2023</b> | <b>3</b>       | <b>Chris Taylor</b> | <b>Update following PC review</b> |
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OFFICIAL

## **CESHIRE EAST COUNCIL –EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

**Stage 1 Description:** Fact finding (about your policy / service /

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| <b>Department</b>  | Place                            |
| <b>Service</b>   | Strategic Transport & Parking    |
| <b>Date</b>  | 24/05/2023                       |
| <b>Lead officer responsible for assessment</b>                   | Chris Taylor                     |
| <b>Other members of team undertaking assessment</b>              | Jenny Marston<br>Richard Hibbert |
| <b>Version</b>   | 3                                |
| <b>Type of document</b>  | Procedure                        |
| <b>Is this a new/ existing/ revision of an existing document</b> | New                              |

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| <p><b>Title and subject of the impact assessment (include a brief description of the aims, outcomes, operational issues as appropriate and how it fits in with the wider aims of the organisation)</b></p> | <p><b>FlexiLink Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) Service Public Consultation</b></p> <p><u>Background</u><br/>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.</p> <p>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</p> |
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**Please attach a copy of the strategy/ plan/ function/ policy/ procedure/ service**

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 Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) 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.

In developing this EqIA, the impacts of these options upon residents and stakeholders who share one or more protected characteristic have been considered. 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.

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|   | <p><u>Consultation</u></p> <p>A period of public and service user consultation is proposed regarding options to improve/modernise the FlexiLink service as part of the Council's passenger transport offer to residents. The consultation period will launch in early August 2023 and continue for 8 weeks until the end of September. The consultation enables engagement with groups to see how the FlexiLink proposals would impact them and build any required mitigation into the options being considered within the consultation. Early conversations are to be held with key stakeholders (vulnerable groups and bus operators). Once these conversations have been held, discussions will be recorded within future iterations of this EqlA.</p> <p><u>Objectives of the Consultation</u></p> <p>It is essential that the council help the engagement/consultation audience understand what the consultation is seeking to achieve and what the desired outcomes are. The consultation will present a series of options for FlexiLink alongside data and supplementary information to enable an informed assessment of potential options. Feedback from stakeholders and residents will then be gathered through an online/paper questionnaire to help inform decision making. The desired outcomes/objectives are therefore:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To present potential options for the FlexiLink service.</li> <li>• To provide data and supporting information to outline why these options have been developed.</li> <li>• To generate a questionnaire that enables feedback from residents and key stakeholders regarding the options, to help inform decision making.</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Who are the main stakeholders and have they been engaged with? (e.g. general public, employees, Councillors, partners, specific audiences, residents)</b></p> | <p>A public consultation will be used to inform all interested parties of the current situation regarding FlexiLink and the need for this service to be modernised. Consultation and engagement with bus user groups, and other key stakeholders will take place to discuss the alternative possible modernisations for FlexiLink and take account of any comments. Full consultation is due to launch in early August 2023.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The general public (including residents and visitors to the borough);</li> <li>• Cheshire East stakeholders;</li> <li>• Public transport operators;</li> <li>• Local businesses/organisations;</li> <li>• Schools and education establishments;</li> <li>• Neighbouring local authorities;</li> <li>• Governmental bodies (e.g. Local Enterprise Partnership);</li> <li>• Statutory transport bodies (e.g. Department for Transport and Transport for the North).</li> </ul>   |

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|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partner organisations</li> <li>• Town and Parish Councils;</li> <li>• Umbrella organisations for people with specialist transport needs, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Space4Autism</li> <li>* Disability Information Bureau (DIB)</li> <li>* Cheshire Centre for Independent living</li> <li>* Cheshire Eye Society</li> <li>* Deafness Support Network</li> <li>* ADCA Medical Transport Service</li> <li>* Congleton Disabled Club</li> <li>* Care4CE</li> <li>* Leonard Cheshire Disability</li> <li>* The Stroke Association</li> <li>* Adult Social Care Partnerships</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Crewe &amp; District Bus Users Group</li> <li>• Transition Wilmslow</li> <li>• Active Travel Congleton</li> <li>• Travel Cheshire</li> <li>• Environmental groups;</li> <li>• MPs</li> </ul> <p>Stakeholder engagement has not yet been conducted and will be carried out as the formal consultation begins. This engagement will be used to gain support and advocates during the public consultation.</p> |
| <b>Consultation/ involvement carried out.</b>   | No  |
| <b>What consultation method(s) did you use?</b> | <p>No formal consultation has taken place to date. It is important for the council to be open and transparent on the purpose of this engagement/consultation, which is to present possible approaches to service modernisation to sound these out with key stakeholders including service users and the general public. The consultation will need to clearly describe why these solutions have been put forward and are deemed suitable for FlexiLink. It is noted that the proposals included within the consultation are not definitive and will take into account feedback gathered as part of the consultation exercise before alterations to the FlexiLink service are initiated.</p> <p>The consultation will launch in August 2023 and run for 8 weeks (an extended period to cover the summer holiday</p>  |

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|  | <p>period) using the following methods:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digital – This will be via the Cheshire East Consultation Page.</li> <li>• Paper Based – Printed materials will be made available within libraries across the borough.</li> <li>• Correspondence – Emails and letters will be tracked and analysed alongside feedback from the above.</li> <li>• Focus groups – This will be targeted at user groups and key equality groups.</li> </ul> |
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**Stage 2 Initial Screening**

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| <p><b>Who is affected and what evidence have you considered to arrive at this analysis?<br/>(This may or may not include the stakeholders listed above)</b></p> | <p>All people using the FlexiLink service – any alterations to the FlexiLink service will have a direct impact on its users. Currently, these are residents within Cheshire East who are over the age of 80, with a disability or without an alternative means of public transport.</p> <p>There are 466 members registered to use the FlexiLink service and at this stage it is unclear how many are regular users, occasional users or inactive. The members are likely to be affected by any service changes / modernisations.</p> <p>This EqIA and consultation will be used to assess the views of the current users regarding future changes to the FlexiLink service. This will be on top of existing conversations held with key user groups. Engagement with groups who represent one of more protected characteristics will help to refine the proposals and mitigate issues before the consultation starts.</p> |
| <p><b>Who is intended to benefit and how</b></p>  | <p>Current and future users of the FlexiLink will benefit from this exercise. The service is under review to ensure future effectiveness, efficiency, affordability and value for money. The council recognises the wider social value associated with this service, such as reducing social isolation and supporting independence.</p>  |
| <p><b>Could there be a different impact or outcome for some groups?</b></p>   | <p>Age – There is the potential for concessionary pass holders to pay a fare to use this service in the future (currently free travel)</p> <p>Disability – There is the potential for concessionary pass holders to pay a fare to use this service in the future (currently free travel)</p>   |

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| <b>Does it include making decisions based on individual characteristics, needs or circumstances?</b>   | All the decisions will be based on assessment of all characteristics. Should there be a negative impact this will be looked at and mitigation measures put in place through scheme designs.  |
| <b>Are relations between different groups or communities likely to be affected? (eg will it favour one particular group or deny opportunities for others?)</b> | No, there should be no effect on relations between different groups or communities.  |
| <b>Is there any specific targeted action to promote equality? Is there a history of unequal outcomes (do you have enough evidence to prove otherwise)?</b>     | There is no specific targeted action to promote equality other than to ensure that the importance of the challenges faced are noted, and recognise the need for CEC to modernise the FlexiLink service to ensure operations are effective, efficient and affordable. |

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| <b>Is there an actual or potential negative impact on these specific characteristics</b> | Yes/ No |
| <b>Age</b>   | Yes     |
| <b>Disability</b>  | Yes     |
| <b>Gender reassignment</b>   | No      |
| <b>Marriage &amp; civil partnership</b>  | No      |
| <b>Pregnancy &amp; maternity</b>   | No      |
| <b>Race</b>  | No      |

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| <b>Religion &amp; belief</b> | No |
| <b>Sex</b>                   | No |
| <b>Sexual orientation</b>    | No |

**Stage 3 Evidence**

| <b>Characteristic</b> | <b>What evidence do you have to support your findings? (quantitative and qualitative)<br/>Please provide additional information that you wish to include as appendices to this document, i.e., graphs, tables, charts</b>  | <b>Level of Risk (High, Medium or Low)</b> |
|-----------------------|--|--|
| <b>Age</b>            | <p>The FlexiLink service is currently used exclusively by concessionary pass holders (over 80 or with a disability). Changes to the service will therefore impact these users directly. The introduction of a fare for concessions will lead to a new expense for these users which could impact accessibility. Use of the service by elderly residents may also be impacted by expanding the service to use specified bus stops, as well as the door-to-door element. The consultation will enable conversations with key groups to understand the impact of such changes and gain broader understanding of the views of residents and other key stakeholders across the borough.</p> <p>Age UK Cheshire East will be contacted prior to the consultation and notified of the consultation, as will youth organisations and local schools. Although it is recognised that there will be impacts for this group,</p> | <b>Low</b>                                 |



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|                                       | at this stage it is difficult to say exactly what the specific issues will be. Updates will be made once initial discussions have been held to reflect the feedback received.  |            |
| <b>Marriage and Civil Partnership</b> | No particular negative impacts have been identified at this stage. However, the public consultation could raise some issues.   | <b>N/A</b> |
| <b>Religion</b>                       | No particular negative impacts have been identified at this stage. However, the public consultation could raise some issues.   | <b>N/A</b> |
| <b>Disability</b>                     | <p>Residents with disabilities could be expected to pay a fare to use the FlexiLink service (currently free) and expanding the service to use specified bus stops, as well as the door-to-door element could deter use by residents with disabilities that impact their mobility.</p> <p>Conversations are to be held with disability groups during the early engagement and consultation stages. A list of disability groups has been assembled and will be included in the notified parties when the consultation is launched, this includes but is not limited to the Disability Information Bureau, Disability Rights UK, Society Support Group – Southeast Cheshire, Sensory Services Cheshire and The Wellbeing Hub.</p> <p>Following discussions with these key stakeholders, the public consultation process will be used to allow more wider sharing of the proposals and feedback.</p> <p>Contact details will be given to anyone experiencing difficulties in contributing to the consultation process if, for example, they need large print or wish to request in an alternative format e.g. phone.</p> <p>Although it is recognised that there will be impacts for this group, at this stage it is difficult to say exactly what the specific issues will be. Updates will be made once initial discussions have been held to reflect the feedback received.</p> | <b>Low</b> |
| <b>Pregnancy and Maternity</b>        | No particular negative impacts have been identified at this stage. However, the public consultation could raise some issues.   | <b>N/A</b> |
| <b>Sex</b>                            | No particular negative impacts have been identified at this stage. However, the public consultation could raise some issues.   | <b>N/A</b> |
| <b>Gender Reassignment</b>            | No particular negative impacts have been identified at this stage. However, the public consultation could raise some issues.   | <b>N/A</b> |

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| <b>Race</b>               | No particular negative impacts have been identified at this stage. However, the public consultation could raise some issues. It is intended that contact details will be made available to anyone who is likely to have difficulty in contributing to the consultation and require text in a language other than English. | <b>Low</b> |
| <b>Sexual Orientation</b> | No particular negative impacts have been identified at this stage. However, the public consultation could raise some issues.  | <b>N/A</b> |

#### Stage 4 Mitigation

| <b>Protected characteristics</b>      | <b>Mitigating action</b><br><i>Once you have assessed the impact of a policy/service, it is important to identify options and alternatives to reduce or eliminate any negative impact. Options considered could be adapting the policy or service, changing the way in which it is implemented or introducing balancing measures to reduce any negative impact. When considering each option you should think about how it will reduce any negative impact, how it might impact on other groups and how it might impact on relationships between groups and overall issues around community cohesion. You should clearly demonstrate how you have considered various options and the impact of these. You must have a detailed rationale behind decisions and a justification for those alternatives that have not been accepted.</i> | <b>How will this be monitored?</b>  | <b>Officer responsible</b> | <b>Target date</b> |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|----------------------------|--------------------|
| <b>Age</b>                            | How the FlexiLink service operates for older people will need to be considered. The booking software will need to identify users who are unable to access virtual bus stops and therefore require a door-to-door pick up.   | Any mobility issues will need to be logged in the operating system to ensure services cater for the needs of these users. | Strategic Transport Team   | Early 2024         |
| <b>Marriage and Civil Partnership</b> | N/A   |   |                            |                    |

|                                |  |   |                          |            |
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| <b>Religion</b>                | N/A  |   |                          |            |
| <b>Disability</b>              | How the FlexiLink operates for disabled users will need to be considered. The booking software will need to identify wheelchair users and those with mobility constraints who are unable to access virtual stops and therefore require a door-to-door pick up. | Disabilities that impact mobility will need to be logged in the operating system to ensure services cater for the needs of these users. | Strategic Transport Team | Early 2024 |
| <b>Pregnancy and Maternity</b> | N/A  |   |                          |            |
| <b>Sex</b>                     | N/A  |   |                          |            |
| <b>Gender Reassignment</b>     | N/A  |   |                          |            |
| <b>Race</b>                    | It is intended that contact details will be made available to anyone who is likely to have difficulty in contributing to the consultation and require text in a language other than English.   | Requests for translation will be monitored through the contact details provided as part of the consultation.                            |                          |            |

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| <b>Sexual Orientation</b> | N/A |  |  |  |
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**5. Review and Conclusion**

**Summary: provide a brief overview including impact, changes, improvement, any gaps in evidence and additional data that is needed**

Changes to the FlexiLink service will directly impact CEC residents with age and disability related protected characteristics. Changes to fare implementation for concessions, service operating hours, booking platforms and pick up arrangements has the potential to have a negative impact upon these users.

Introducing a fare for concessionary pass holders may impact service accessibility as this adds an additional expense for these users compared to the current situation. This could lead to less frequent journeys and isolation so any fare structure needs to be considered carefully. Conversations with Age UK and disability groups prior to consultation will ensure that proposals are designed with these users in mind and public consultation will enable wider feedback.

Similarly, if the service is expanded to use specified bus stops, the door-to-door element would need to be retained for some users as this could have a detrimental impact upon users with reduced mobility who use the service at present. This could lead to service users with reduced mobility being isolated/excluded and needing to book a more expensive taxi service to cater for their needs. Discussions with Age UK and disability user groups will again be utilised to ensure proposals fulfil the needs of vulnerable users, with public consultation used to provide wider feedback from interested parties.

Providing an app-based method of booking the FlexiLink service has the potential to simplify the booking process for users who are familiar with such technology. A telephone system will also be retained so existing users will not experience negative impacts.

Extending the operating hours of the service has the potential to increase service utilisation, this could encourage users to shop or visit relatives for longer and use the service for leisure activities that run into the late afternoon/early evening.

Data including passenger numbers, costs, journey purpose and journey frequency has been evaluated to understand the current utilisation of the service and where improvements could be implemented.

Engagement with protected groups will continue throughout the consultation process and prior to any service changes to identify any potential negative issues and address as appropriate.

| <b>Specific actions to be taken to reduce, justify or remove any adverse impacts</b> | <b>How will this be monitored?</b>             | <b>Officer responsible</b> | <b>Target date</b> |
|--|--|----------------------------|--------------------|
| Document to be reviewed and updated post consultation.                               | Through project board and standard governance. | Chris Taylor               | September 2023     |
| Document to be reviewed and updated throughout project progression.                  | Through project board and standard governance. | Chris Taylor               | Ongoing            |

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| <b>Please provide details and link to full action plan for actions</b>                                 | Please see the Consultation & Engagement Plan for more details on how the project will be progressed and key actions for conducting engagement activities is accessible by CEC's consultation page. |
| <b>When will this assessment be reviewed?</b>  | October 2023 (post consultation)  |
| <b>Are there any additional assessments that need to be undertaken in relation to this assessment?</b> | No  |
| <b>Lead officer sign off</b>   | Chris Taylor  |
| <b>Date</b>  | 24/05/2023  |
| <b>Head of service sign off</b>  | Richard Hibbert   |
| <b>Date</b>  | 10/07/23  |

**Please publish this completed EIA form on the relevant section of the Cheshire East website**