

Environment and Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny

Date of Meeting: 16 March 2020

Report Title: FlexiLink-Update on Service Delivery and Performance

Portfolio Holder: Cllr Craig Browne-Deputy Leader

Senior Officer: Frank Jordan-Executive Director (Place)

1. Report Summary

- 1.1. The Council provides financial support to operate certain bus services throughout the Borough. This includes scheduled bus services and a flexible transport service known as FlexiLink (formerly Little Bus).
- 1.2. These services enable residents to access local services in places where commercial bus services do not operate. The Council's objectives for subsidising bus services are, as follows:
 - 1.2.1. To provide passenger services for residents most in need to enable access to essential services, including health, education, employment, retail and leisure;
 - 1.2.2. To provide bus services which maximise value for money and deliver an effective and efficient network of supported bus services;
 - 1.2.3. To increase usage of the bus network;
 - 1.2.4. To provide a network of supported bus services which complements the commercial bus network in the Borough; and
 - 1.2.5. To ensure that supported bus services are affordable and financially sustainable within the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).
- 1.3. In April 2019, Cabinet resolved to return the Little Bus service to Council operation. FlexiLink operations commenced in August 2019, with the new

services being operated by the Council's wholly-owned transport company Transport Service Solutions (TSS) Ltd.

- 1.4. The approach to FlexiLink services was expected to have a number of advantages for passengers, most notably;
 - 1.4.1. the provision of a modern fleet with more vehicles operating at passengers' preferred travel times of operation.
 - 1.4.2. improved management of FlexiLink operations and closer integration with the Council's wider bus planning capabilities
 - 1.4.3. opportunities to increase the use of Little Bus by eligible residents to provide greater access to healthcare, social care and community facilities.
 - 1.4.4. making a contribution to meeting the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) savings targets.
- 1.5. This report provides the Scrutiny Committee with an update on the delivery and performance of FlexiLink, as it is now 6 months since operations by TSS commenced. Information included in the report are derived from records relating to fleet management and passengers bookings. In addition, responses to the annual Customer Satisfaction Survey which took place in February 2020 are summarised here. Further details on the findings of this survey will be available in the form of a presentation at the committee.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That Overview and Scrutiny Committee considers the report setting out the recent performance of FlexiLink services.

3. Background

- 3.1. FlexiLink is a flexible transport (dial a ride) service which provides transport for eligible residents who are unable to access a scheduled bus service due to mobility constraints or rural isolation. Eligibility criteria for FlexiLink usage are, as follows;
 - 3.1.1. people aged over 80;
 - 3.1.2. people registered disabled, and

3.1.3. people without access to any other scheduled public transport.

3.2. The approach approved by Cabinet included the following key principles;

3.2.1. to operate FlexiLink services through the existing contract with TSS, utilising the TSS fleet which provides home-to-school transport services.

3.2.2. to provide cost efficiencies and more journey opportunities for passengers by expanding the TSS fleet to 9 vehicles. To recruit additional staff as necessary to operate services and, in so doing, to honour all TUPE obligations that arise for staff working for the previous operator.

3.2.3. to revise the hours of operation for FlexiLink to coincide with peak passenger demand and to integrate with times when school transport is required. Accordingly, since August 2019, the hours of operation for Flexilink have been 9.30am to 2.30pm.

3.2.4. introduction of a dedicated vehicle to enable a number of regular FlexiLink users attending clubs and group events to return home between the hours of 2.30pm and 4.00pm.

4. Update of FlexiLink Service Performance

4.1. Commencing in August 2017, TSS has been operating FlexiLink services in accordance with the principles defined by the Cabinet resolution (see paragraph 3.2 above). The key aspects of mobilising and operating the new FlexiLink service during the period August 2019 to February 2020 are summarised in the following paragraphs.

4.1.1. Increased journey opportunities

4.1.1.1. The new FlexiLink schedules deploy a fleet of 9 vehicles. The operational approach reflects long-established patterns of demand for dial-a-ride services, with the majority of trips in the morning and early afternoon.

4.1.1.2. It is inevitable that the reduction in operating hours has affected some passengers travel arrangements. We estimate that 83.4% of previously-booked trips have been successfully accommodated, with 74.3% requiring no change in time-of-travel and a further 9.1% of non-time dependent trips able to be rescheduled.

4.1.1.3. A comprehensive review of the booking process has been completed to improve the flexibility and offer to clients. Trips for non-time dependent purposes such as shopping have been reviewed with clients to maximise spare capacity by rearranging and combining these bookings where possible.

4.1.1.4. The journey purposes of FlexiLink users in the most recent period of operation are summarised in Figure 1, below.

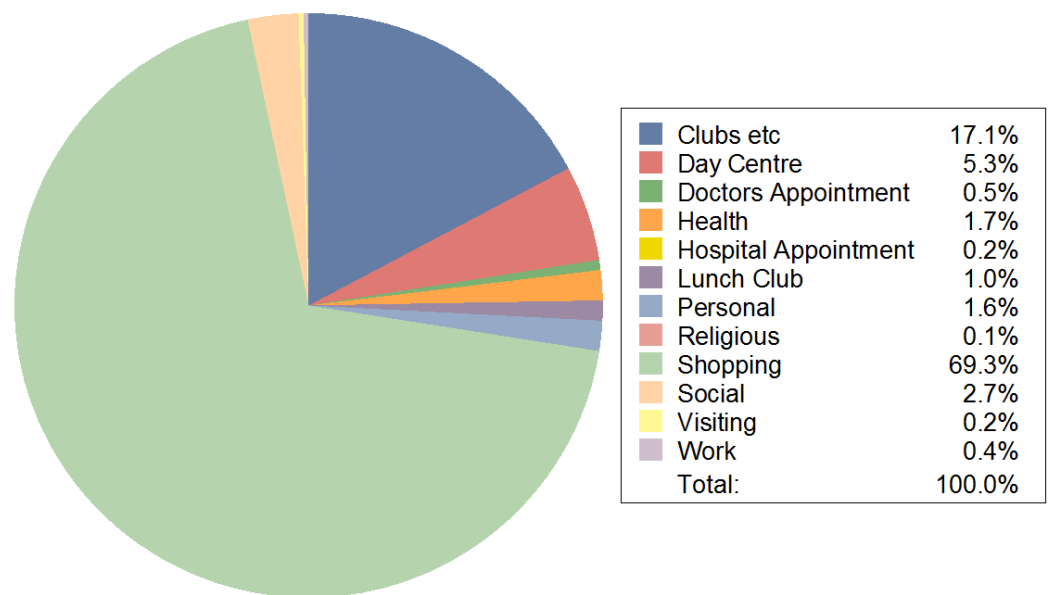


Figure 1 – Journey Purpose for FlexiLink users (January 2020)

4.1.1.5. The level of FlexiLink ridership, by locality, is summarised in Figure 2 (below). Overall, 83% of booked journeys were completed, 16.3% were cancelled by the client, and only 0.7% of requested bookings were refused. There is very little variation in these proportions by locality within Cheshire East. With regard to total patronage, FlexiLink ridership remains skewed towards the communities in and around Crewe and the south of the borough, though this effect is less marked since the new service was introduced in August 2019.

	Completed	Cancelled	Refused	Total
Congleton, Alsager, Crewe, Sandbach, Holmes Chapel, Middlewich	1450	287	10	1747
Crewe, Nantwich, Audlem, Whitchurch, Bunbury	1105	202	15	1322
Knutsford, Wilmslow, Handforth, Alderley Edge, Chelford, Macclesfield	880	200	0	1080
Macclesfield, Disley, Bollington, Poynton, Congleton, Handforth, Alderley Edge, Wilmslow	477	81	9	567
Total	3912	770	34	4716

Figure 2 – FlexiLink Ridership (January 2020)

4.1.2. Efficient use of resources

4.1.2.1. 12 members of staff were transferred from the former operator to TSS under TUPE. These staff included a dedicated team of drivers plus and administrator / booking clerk. All staff completed a company training and mobilisation programme prior to commencing their duties. All transferred staff have made an invaluable contribution to the successful operation of FlexiLink.

4.1.2.2. FlexiLink operation by TSS is making a significant contribution to the Councils MTFS savings plan. In FY 2019/20, a part-year net saving of £110k will be achieved after allowance is made for set-up costs. In subsequent years, a full year effect of £223k is estimated from 2020/21.

4.1.2.3. The projected saving enables the Council to meet its MTFS target for the service, with an additional £73k saving contributing to the Council's Home to School transport budget from 2020/21 onwards. Savings on Home to School transport arise from greater utilisation of the dedicated fleet of vehicles leading to a reduction in overhead costs. No other changes to the Home to School transport service arise from this proposal.

4.1.3. Vehicle Fleet and Branding

4.1.3.1. As part of the re-branding of the service, a modern minibus fleet is provided with an average vehicle age of 2-3 years. The vehicles are fully wheelchair accessible and are expected to meet the particular needs of service-users. This compares favourably with the vehicles that were operating when the service was procured under contract.

4.1.3.2. The FlexiLink fleet has been branded to ensure it is readily recognisable by passengers and the wider community. Figure 3 (below) illustrates the new branded vehicles.



Figure 3 – FlexiLink branded vehicle

5. Customer Survey 2019/20

- 5.1. As part of the operational performance monitoring of FlexiLink, the annual survey of customers was undertaken in February 2020. The following paragraphs summarise some of the key results. Further details will be provided to the meeting in the form of a presentation.
- 5.2. Clients were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with FlexiLink in a number of key areas. 219 responses were received to this question, as follows;

	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
The reliability of the service	82%	18%	0%	0%
The comfort of the vehicles used	72%	26%	2%	0%
The courtesy of the Driver	97%	3%	0%	0%
The overall service provided by FlexiLink	76%	22%	2%	0%

- 5.3. Clients were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with FlexiLink in a number of key areas. 213 responses were received to this question, as follows;

	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
The customer service and proficiency of the office staff	70%	24%	5%	1%
The efficiency and ease of booking travel	66%	26%	6%	2%

- 5.4. Overall, clients were asked “*Since FlexiLink replaced Little Bus in August 2019, overall how has the service changed?*” 204 responses were received, as follows;

Got better	32%
Got worse	12%
Stayed the same	49%
No reply	7%

- 5.5. Overall, responses to the customer survey indicate that service users perceive a general improvement in service quality since August 2019. Levels of client satisfaction are high across a range of attributes. Areas of dissatisfaction will continue to be closely monitored to ensure that these are addressed, wherever possible, and that there is no further deterioration. In many instances, customer dissatisfaction is closely related to requests for travel that our outside the hours-of-operation for FlexiLink.

6 Ward Members Affected

- 6.1 All Wards and all ward members.

7 Access to Information

- 7.1 The background papers for the proposals are available by contacting the report author.

8 Contact Information

- 8.1 Any questions relating to this report should be directed to the following officer:

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