

Flexible Transport Review

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CEC Bus Service Review 2024

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Contents

1.	The Role of Demand Responsive Transport	2
1.1	A definition of Demand Responsive Transport	2
1.2	Benefits of DRT	2
1.3	Local Transport Plan	3
1.4	Bus Services Improvement Plan (BSIP) 2024	3
1.5	Corporate Plan	4
2.	Local Context	6
2.1	Socio-Economic Context	6
3.	Current DRT Provision and Performance	10
3.1	Current DRT Provision	10
3.2	FlexiLink Performance	11
3.3	Go-Too Performance	14
4.	Passenger Perspective – Consultation Results	17
4.1	FlexiLink Consultation 2023	17
4.2	Go-Too Survey 2024	19
4.3	Bus Service Review Consultation 2024	20
4.4	Summary	23
5.	National Best Practice	24
5.1	Overall Summary	24
6.	Case for Change	27
6.1	Lessons Learned	27
6.2	SWOT Analysis	27
7.	Recommended Proposal	29
7.1	Recommended Provision	29
7.2	Implications for Passengers on 70, 72 and 73 Bus Services	31
8.	Future Delivery Models - Options	33
8.1	Introduction	33
8.2	Current Fleet - Shared with SEND Home to School Transport	33
8.3	Current Fleet - Dedicated Flexible Transport	33
8.4	Current Fleet - Dedicated SEND Home to School Transport	33
8.5	Open Market Tender for Flexible Transport Services	33
8.6	Innovative Delivery Methods	34
9.	Conclusion	36

1. The Role of Demand Responsive Transport

1.1 A definition of Demand Responsive Transport

Department for Transport (DfT) guidance issued in 2022 defines Demand Responsive Transport (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 can complement fixed-route public transport services and improve mobility in low-density areas and at times of day when demand is low. DRT services run without a set timetable and typically use smaller vehicles than fixed-route bus services.

The National Bus Strategy for England, published by the DfT in 2021 and entitled “Bus Back Better”, set out the role of DRT. It can offer a more personal, on-demand service, taking people from their doors or closer to their doors than a conventional bus service. DRT is seen as particularly useful to improve provision in rural areas, where there is very little bus provision, and in the evenings. Because it offers more of a door-to-door service, DRT can overcome the concerns of some users, particularly women, about taking public transport at night.

The DfT guidance indicated that DRT can have a range of purposes, including:

- Addressing suppressed travel demand, providing the opportunity for individuals to access a destination or service, such as for employment, education, healthcare or retail, or to connect to a transport hub to complete their journey.
- Providing a flexible service in place of a conventional fixed service.
- Acting as a feeder service to existing bus or rail services.
- Consolidating existing bus services, enabling one service to meet multiple needs, such as home-to-school, home-to-healthcare and home-to-work journeys
- Providing an alternative to private car journeys, encouraging people who do not use conventional bus services to use shared transport by providing a more flexible, personalised service. “Hop on, hop off” services can also serve tourists, for example, to provide access to rural walks, attractions or services.

1.2 Benefits of DRT

DRT can have a number of social and economic benefits, as well as helping to reduce the carbon impact of travel. Benefits include

- Replacing multiple single-occupancy car journeys
- Using smaller vehicles which are likely to be more efficient, both in fuel and carbon terms, than a large bus for transporting smaller numbers of passengers
- Providing equity of access to public transport for those living in sparsely populated rural areas

- Providing mobility for those on low incomes who cannot afford to buy or run a car
- Providing travel independence to disabled people, by customising rides to offer door-to-door service and providing vehicles equipped for wheelchair users
- Providing connectivity to fixed-route public transport services in rural areas
- Enabling older people to live independently in their own homes for longer than would otherwise be the case
- Enabling older and disabled people to maintain social contacts and access recreational opportunities, reducing the impacts of loneliness and social isolation¹.

It is recognised that DRT also has some limitations, which include:

- Vehicle capacity is less than a standard bus, reducing the number of passengers that can be carried on each journey
- Cost per passenger journey is generally significantly higher than for fixed-route bus services
- Potential lack of clarity and certainty for passengers regarding reliability of pick-up times
- Difficulty in communicating to the public how the service operates.

1.3 Local Transport Plan

For Cheshire East specifically, DRT has a role to play in supporting delivery of the Local Transport Plan (LTP) vision and objectives. Investment in DRT will help to deliver our vision: “Cheshire East’s transport network will enable growth through improved connectivity, a better quality of life and enhanced quality of place.”

Providing public transport accessibility for residents in rural areas is identified as a key challenge in the context of wider financial constraints. The LTP recognises that good accessibility is vital to ensuring rural areas continue to thrive economically and socially. Rural businesses require connections to labour, markets and suppliers whilst rural residents need access to jobs, services, friends and families. Within the LTP, we commit to exploring innovative ways of ensuring rural connectivity, including supporting community organisations to support transport services.

1.4 Bus Services Improvement Plan (BSIP) 2024

The Council has published a Bus Services Improvement Plan (BSIP) which sets out the vision and strategic plan for local bus in Cheshire East, as well as how central government funding will be used to provide bus service improvements. An initial BSIP was published in 2021, which was revised in 2024. The vision for the BSIP is

¹ Research published in 2020 by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, using methods endorsed by HM Treasury Green Book, estimated the monetary impact of “moderate to severe loneliness” as at least £9,976 per person (in 2019 prices); <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/loneliness-monetisation-report>

to “transform the bus network within Cheshire East to provide attractive, reliable and convenient connections that enable more residents and visitors to choose bus, make fewer car journeys, to contribute to our carbon reduction challenge and improve the health of our citizens”.

The BSIP also set out the following “Ambitions for Bus”:

- Improved frequencies on our town and inter-urban routes, with better access to health services, employment, education, transport hubs and leisure/retail.
- Continued support for socially necessary services, providing flexible and fixed-route services to link into the wider bus network.
- Reduced pinch-points on the network to improve journey times and reliability.
- Collaboration with local bus operators to improve the quality of the bus fleet and reduce emissions.
- More affordable journeys, within towns and for younger people.
- Improved integrated ticket offers between bus operators and modes.
- Improvements to waiting environments and bus stops to provide a safe travel experience.
- Our draft Bus Passenger Charter ensures bus users know their rights to certain standards of bus services and that these standards are met.
- Bus information readily available, easy to use and up-to-date.
- Improved journey planning and in-journey information.

DRT has a key role in providing rural services and access between rural areas and principal towns and key service centres. DRT services can be reconfigured to complement the fixed route network and ensure an appropriate blend between fixed route and flexible services and open up new travel options for service users.

1.5 Corporate Plan

DRT will also help to deliver several Corporate Outcomes, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Corporate Outcomes Supported by DRT

	Corporate Outcome	DRT Offer
1.	Our local communities are strong and supportive	Provide residents with access to services and leisure opportunities, especially those living in more rural areas, enabling greater social inclusion and reducing rural isolation.
2.	Cheshire East has a strong and resilient economy	Provide access to employment which would otherwise not be possible.
3.	People have the life skills and education they need in order to thrive	Provide young people and adults with safe, affordable travel options to access skills, education and other opportunities.

	Corporate Outcome	DRT Offer
4.	Cheshire East is a green and sustainable place	Encourage mode shift from car to public transport, providing access to places of recreation and leisure to people who would otherwise only be able to travel by private car or taxi, or not travel at all.
5.	People live well and for longer	Increase the proportion of residents who are able to access key destinations, services and employment, further education and training opportunities by public transport, especially those living in more rural areas. Enable people to live independently for longer.

2. Local Context

2.1 Socio-Economic Context

2.1.1 Rural / Urban Classification

Data from the 2021 Census shows that the majority of the geographic area of Cheshire East is classified as “rural village and dispersed”. However, with an average population density of around 0.5 people per hectare, only 15% of the population live in these areas. A little over 25% of the population live in edge of town areas surrounding the major settlements such as Crewe, Macclesfield, Wilmslow and Congleton, which are classified as “urban city and town”. Despite the overall rural nature of the borough, over 60% of the population live in areas classified as “urban”, which have a much higher population density.

The map below in Figure 1 shows the land areas classified as rural and urban in Census data in Cheshire East, overlaid with the bus route network. The purple colouring indicates a 400-metre buffer around each bus stop which is served by a fixed-route bus service; a distance that most people can walk within five minutes. People living within the area covered by the buffer are considered to have accessibility to bus services and includes approximately 85% of the population of Cheshire East. The remaining 15% of the population therefore does not have easy access to fixed-route bus services and may need to use a flexible transport service.

2.1.2 Ageing Population

Cheshire East also has an ageing population. Data from the 2021 Census showed that 22.3% of the population is aged 65 and over. This has increased since the 2011 Census and is a higher proportion than the equivalent age group in Cheshire West (21.3%), the North West (18.7%) and the whole of England (18.4%). Elderly adults are more likely to face mobility issues and are more likely to be reliant on public transport. If living in rural areas or beyond a reasonable walking distance to a bus stop, they are more likely to be reliant on DRT.

2.1.3 Index of Multiple Deprivation

The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) is a useful tool for targeting services to help tackle deprivation. It provides a means of identifying the most and least deprived areas in England and to compare whether one area is more deprived than another. The latest IMD was compiled in 2019, in which the country was divided into 32,844 Lower layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs). These are geographic areas produced by the Office for National Statistics for the reporting of small area statistics. They comprise between 400 and 1,200 households and usually have a resident population between 1,000 and 3,000 persons. There were 234 LSOAs in Cheshire East in 2019.

The IMD is a combined measure of relative deprivation based on a total of 37 separate indicators that have been grouped into seven themes, or domains. Each of the domains reflects a different aspect of deprivation experienced by individuals living in an LSOA. For each of the domains, and for the overall IMD, the LSOAs are ranked from the most deprived to the least deprived. These are then grouped into deciles, each of which represents 10% of the LSOAs. The “Geographical Barriers to

Services” indicator is classed as a sub-domain of the “Barriers to Housing and Services” domain.

Physical distance from services and facilities presents a problem in rural areas such as Cheshire East and as such the Geographical Barriers to Services has a very different pattern across the borough to the other domains of deprivation. It relates to the physical proximity of local services and is made up of the following indicators, each of which is a measure of the mean distance to the closest of the following service for all of the people living in each LSOA:

- Distance (by road) to the closest post office
- Distance (by road) to the closest primary school
- Distance (by road) to the closest general store or supermarket
- Distance (by road) to the closest GP surgery

Figure 2 shows the Geographical Barriers to Services decile rankings for Cheshire East. Most of the geographical area of Cheshire East is in the lowest 2 deciles (i.e. the most deprived), with most if not all of the population centres, even the smaller settlements, in the highest deciles (the least deprived). This illustrates that most people in rural areas need to travel a significant distance to reach essential services. If they do not have access to a car or a fixed-route bus service, residents in these areas would be isolated without DRT service provision.

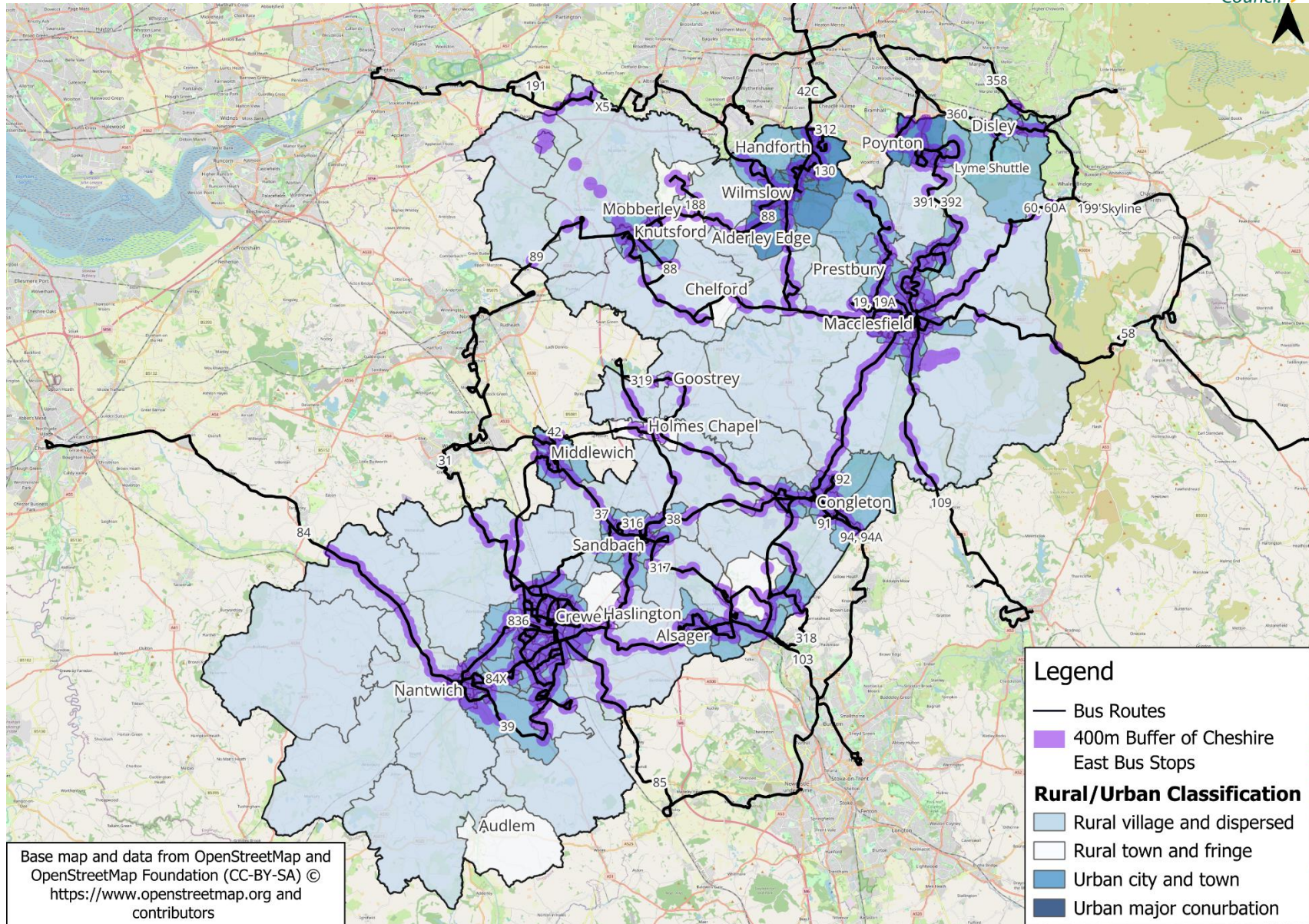
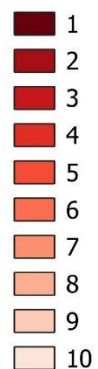


Figure 1 Map showing rural/urban land classifications along with accessibility to bus services

Geographical Barriers
Sub-domain Decile (2019)
(where 1 is most deprived
10% of LSOAs)

LSOA Deciles (2011 Boundaries):



OSM Standard

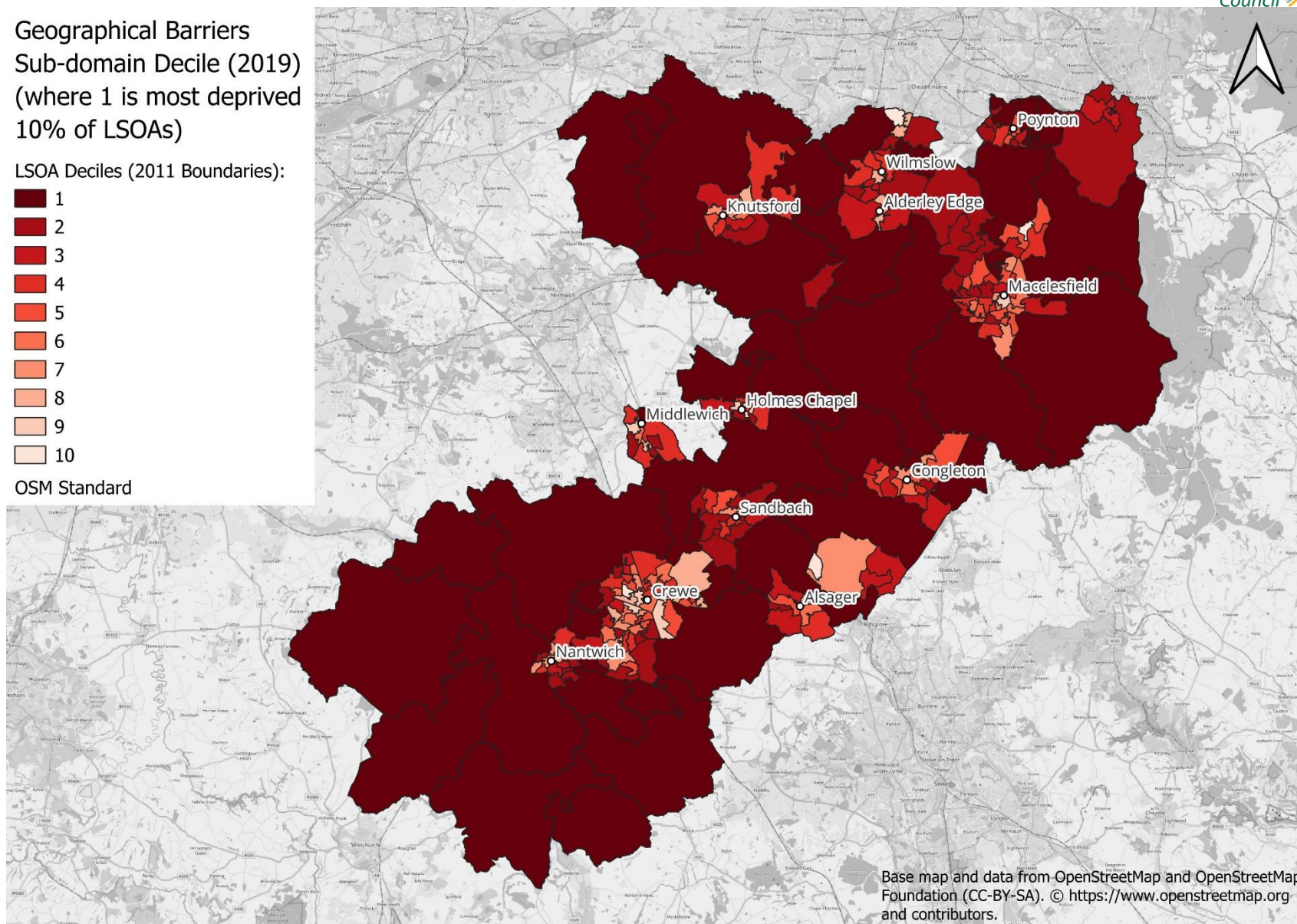


Figure 2 Map showing Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) Geographical Barriers Sub-Domain Deciles

3. Current DRT Provision and Performance

3.1 Current DRT Provision

There are two DRT services operating within Cheshire East, as shown in Table 2.

The FlexiLink service was brought in-house from a local bus operator in 2019 and is funded by the Council. 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. It has almost 1,000 registered users. The vehicle fleet is integrated with the provision of home to school transport for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Therefore, FlexiLink only operates between 09.30 and 14.30, Monday to Friday.

Go-Too is operated as a fixed-term pilot project, funded by the DfT's Rural Mobility Fund and will continue until 31 March 2025. It can be used by anyone travelling in the operating area to the south and west of Nantwich (see Figure 4 below) from 07.00 to 21.00, Monday to Saturday. It has almost 600 registered users (who have made at least 2 journeys since January 2024).

Table 2 DRT Services operating within Cheshire East

	FlexiLink	Go-Too
Operating Area	All of Cheshire East	Rural area south and west of Nantwich (map below)
Eligibility	Over 80, or disabled, or have no available public transport	Available to all travellers in the operating area
Operating Times	Monday to Friday, 09:30 – 14:30	Monday to Saturday, 07:00 – 21:00
Fare Cost	£3 per journey, free for concessionary pass holders	£3 per journey, £2 for concessionary pass holders
Booking Process	Telephone or email	Online, phone app or telephone
Passenger Access	Door-to-door service	Pick-up points
Notice Period	From 1 month to 48 hours prior to travel	From 14 days up to 17:00* (telephone); or on-demand (app)
No of Vehicles	10 (+ 1 spare)	2 (+ 1 spare)
Funding Source	CEC	DfT Rural Mobility Fund

* Telephone bookings for Saturday travel must be made by 17:00 on Friday

Both services use minibuses with a maximum of 16 seats, see below, although many of the vehicles are configured for wheelchair users and therefore have lower seating capacity. A wheelchair assessment is required before the first booking can be made.

FlexiLink



Go-Too



Approximately 80% of Go-Too bookings are made online using the Smartphone application, with the remaining 20% made by telephone. Go-Too uses route planning and scheduling software to optimise routes and maximise vehicle occupancy. FlexiLink bookings are taken by email or telephone (the booking line is open 3 hours per day). Passenger aggregation and route scheduling is carried out manually, with no automated routing or scheduling software.

The FlexiLink service operates across the borough and is loosely split into four separate operating areas, as shown below in Figure 3. Go-Too operates within the area shown below in Figure 4. Journeys can be made to and from anywhere within the dark green zone and between the dark green and light green zones.

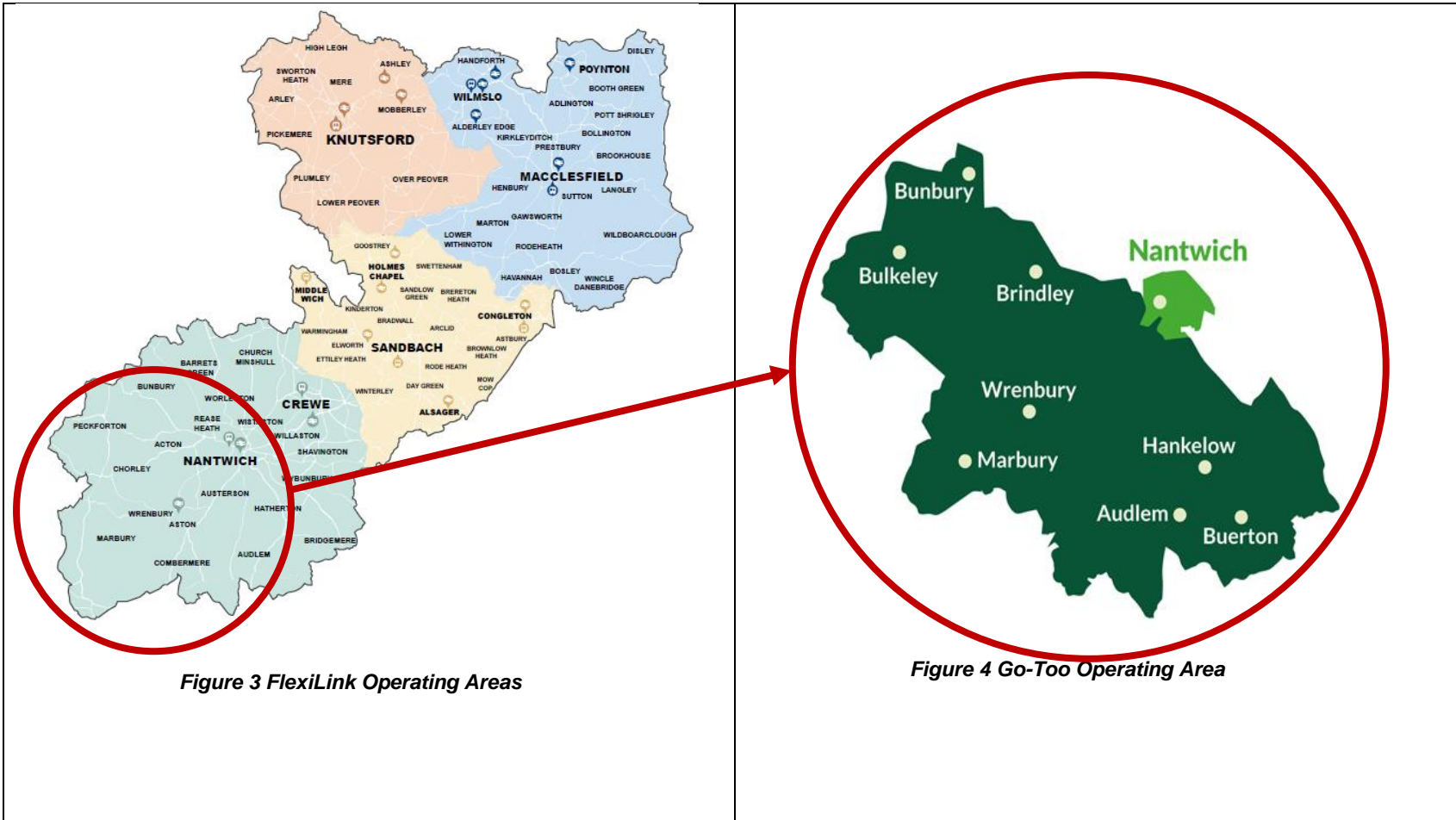
3.2 FlexiLink Performance

FlexiLink started operation in its current form in Autumn 2019, as shown in Figure 5. Nearly 5,000 passengers were carried in its first month of operation. This was the highest to date; no other month of operation has reached this level. Around 4,000 or more passengers were carried in each of the first few months, except for December 2019, however operations ceased in February 2020 with Covid-19 on the horizon.

The service resumed in August 2020, with strong initial growth, though this was suppressed by the return of travel restrictions in the winter of 2020. Patronage has grown steadily since Spring 2021, with some noticeable dips in the winter months, especially December. Patronage grew every quarter from 2021 Q1 to 2022 Q3, and from 2023 Q1 to 2024 Q2. In the first half of 2024, between 2,600 and 3,000 passenger journeys have been delivered each month. Over 3,000 passengers were carried in May 2024, the highest monthly total since February 2020. However, this is still only 60% of August 2019 patronage.

Passengers are asked their journey purpose when making a booking. Over the period from April 2022 to March 2024, over 68% of journeys were for shopping, 20% for clubs and day centres, 5% for general social activity and 4% for health-related travel. Analysis of 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.

Most of the ten available vehicles are in regular usage, with eight or nine being deployed most days. Analysis of the total passenger numbers for the year-to-date and total operating hours available (if all 10 vehicles were operating and allowing for driver's statutory rest periods) shows that an average of 3.2 passengers were carried per operating hour.



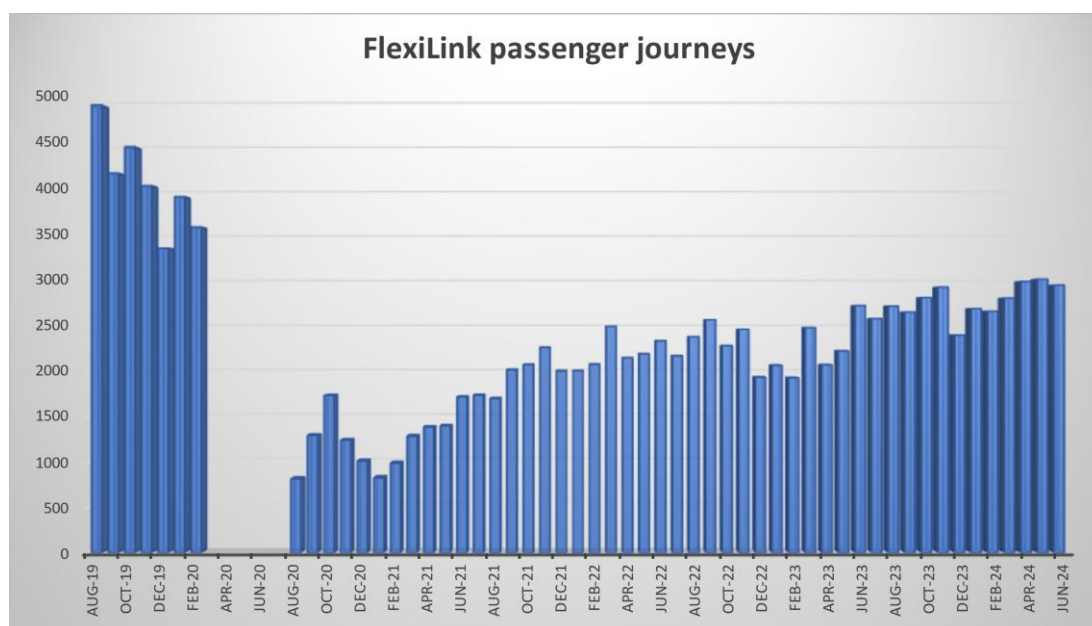


Figure 5 FlexiLink Passenger Journeys

Demand tends to be higher on Thursdays and Fridays than the rest of the week. Detailed analysis was carried out of FlexiLink vehicle usage over five separate weeks in the months of June, August, September and November 2022, and March 2023. This showed that the average number of passengers per journey across was four, see Table 3. There is some geographical variation; the average was above six for services in the northwest (route FT5). In the northeast (route FT2), the average was a little over two passengers per journey.

Table 3 Average Number of FlexiLink Passengers per Journey

Operating Area	Average number of passengers per journey
FT2 – Macclesfield/Poynton/Disley	2.2
FT3 – Sandbach/Haslington/Alsager/Middlewich	4.4
FT4 – Crewe & Nantwich Area	3.7
FT5 – Knutsford/Handforth Dean/Wilmslow	6.3
Average across Borough	4.1

Low vehicle occupancy results in a relatively high cost per passenger journey, although it is recognised that this does not reflect the wider social value of the service, in terms of enabling independence and reducing social isolation. The average number of passengers per journey needs to be balanced against vehicle utilisation to get a more rounded picture of performance.

The advantages and disadvantages of the current FlexiLink service are shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4 FlexiLink Service Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages	Disadvantages
Provides travel independence to elderly and disabled people, enabling the maintenance of social contacts and access to recreational opportunities, reducing the impacts of loneliness and social isolation.	The restricted eligibility criteria result in low levels of demand and under-utilised vehicles. No automated routing and scheduling software, resulting in inefficient vehicle deployment.

3.3 Go-Too Performance

Go-Too started operation in October 2021, as shown in Figure 6. It has achieved generally steady growth, with a few peaks and troughs. Over 1,000 passenger journeys were completed for the first time in August 2022, a trend which continued until December 2022, then resumed in March 2023, after a slight dip to just under 900 per month in January and February. Passenger journeys grew to over 1,500 in July 2023 and have averaged almost that number over the last 12 months.

The average number of passengers per journey is lower than FlexiLink, at 1.3, which reflects the rural and sparsely populated nature of the operating area and the relatively low uptake of the service by local residents. Analysis of the total passenger numbers for the year-to-date and total operating hours available (with both vehicles operating and allowing for driver's statutory rest periods) shows that an average of 2.5 passengers were carried per operating hour.

Respondents to a Go-Too survey (281 respondents) carried out in February 2024 indicated that 60% of journeys were for leisure activities, 11% for commuting to work, 11% for "daily errands" (including shopping) and 10% were connecting to other public transport services. The remaining 8% comprised accessing community facilities, education, healthcare, childcare and other purposes.

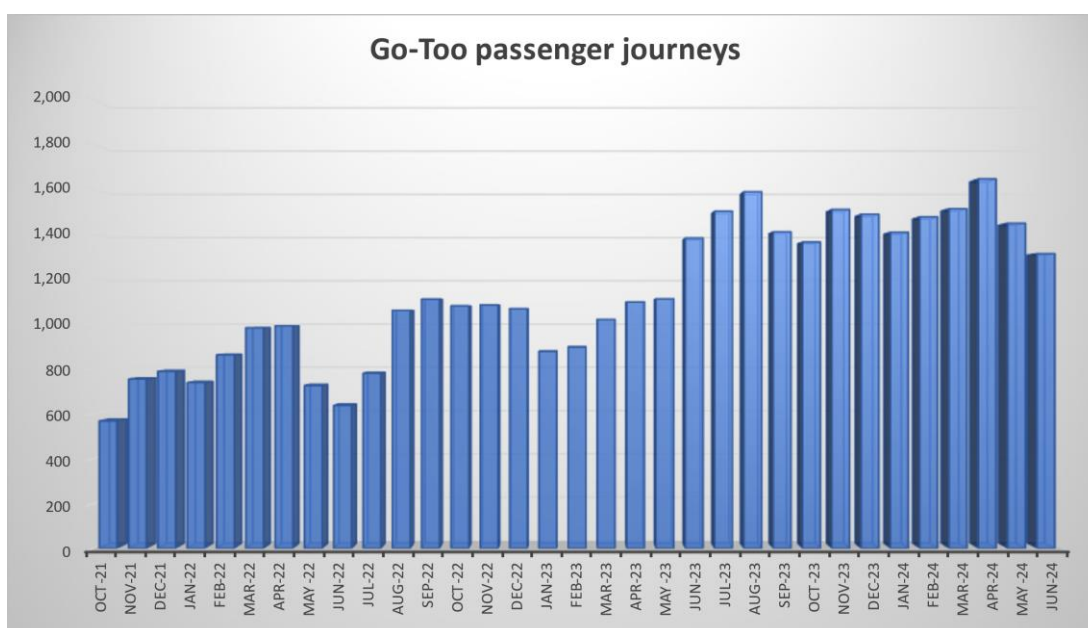


Figure 6 Go-Too Passenger Journeys

The Go-Too passenger survey also showed that 63% of respondents were female and 37% male. The majority of respondents were aged 55 and over (55%), but 9% were aged 16 – 24 (most likely to be in education, training or an apprenticeship) and a further 8% were aged 25 - 34. 71% said that they had a car available and 79% said that they had no long-term physical or mental disabilities which affect their use of the Go-Too service.

The Go-Too system uses dedicated industry standard software for booking and scheduling rides and optimising vehicle routing. The main benefits of this are as follows:

- Dynamic routing and matching algorithms to aggregate and direct trips
- Passenger App for booking and real-time vehicle tracking
- Web application and phone support for passengers without smartphones
- Driver App providing directions, support, and real-time vehicle locations
- Easily accessed administrative console with a range of tools and functionalities
- Data analytics and reporting with granular operational data and trends

The data analytics and reporting provide a lot more management information than is the case with FlexiLink. The average number of Go-Too journeys operated per week in the year-to-date is 266 with an average of 336 passengers carried per week, as shown in Figure 7.

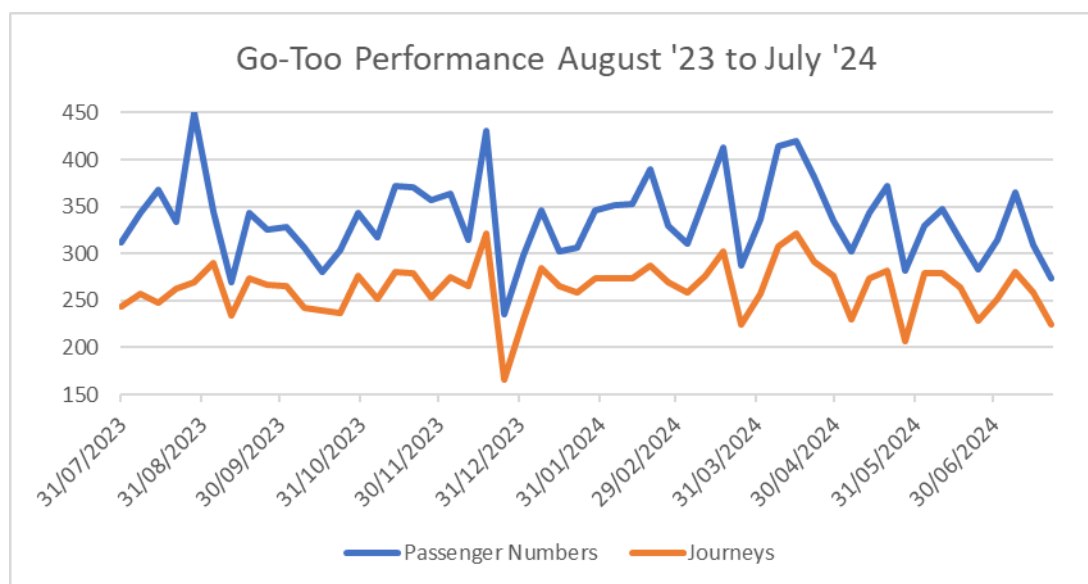


Figure 7 Go-Too Passenger Numbers and Journeys, Year to Date

The average number of passengers carried each day in the year-to-date was lowest on Monday (46), fairly consistent for Tuesday to Thursday (512 to 52, increased on Friday (61) and again on Saturday (85).

Go-Too services covered an average of 1,220 miles per week on passenger carrying journeys in the year-to-date. Figure 8 below shows how many passengers were carried as a proportion of this total mileage. Over 93% of mileage was taken up with the carriage of only one (62%), two (24%) or three (7%) passengers. Less than 7% of mileage was taken up with the carriage of four or more passengers. Passenger loadings will be closely monitored for any effects of the withdrawal of services 70, 72 and 73 (Nantwich rural services).

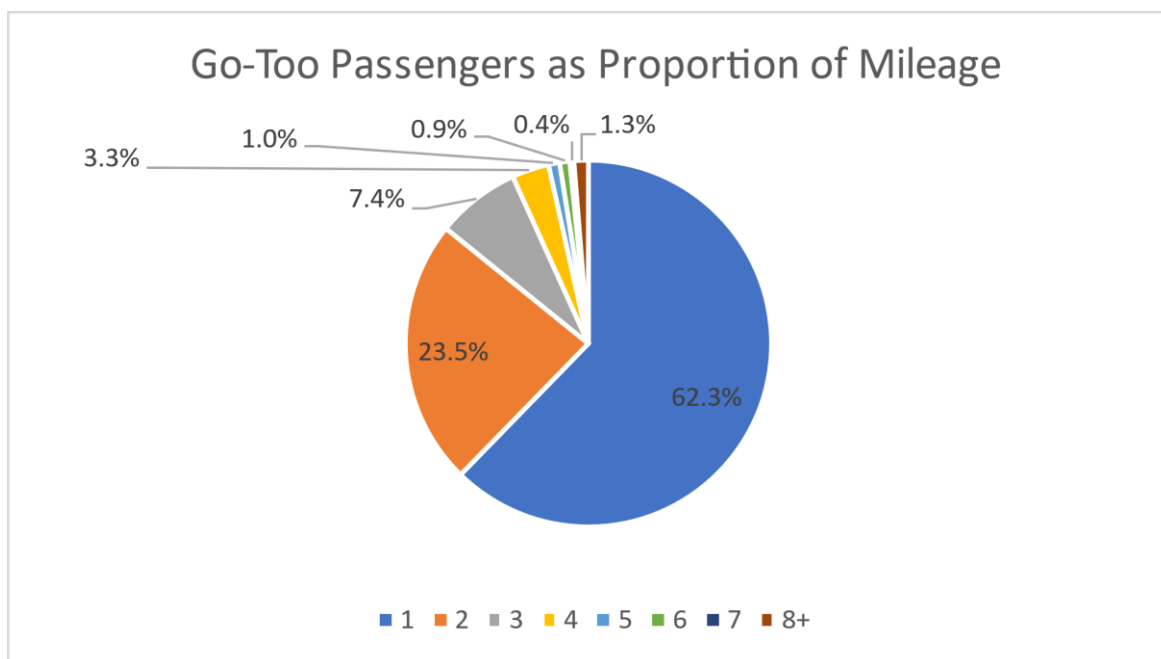


Figure 8 Go-Too Passengers Carried as Proportion of Operational Mileage

The advantages and disadvantages of the Go-Too service are shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Go-Too Service Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>Provides access to transport for travellers in a sparsely populated rural area.</p> <p>Automated routing and scheduling software provides a passenger interface for booking and vehicle tracking and maximises efficiency of operations.</p> <p>Used by a range of age groups for various purposes, mainly leisure related.</p> <p>50% of passengers surveyed are employed and 7% are students. Over 11% of journeys in the survey period were commuting to work.</p>	<p>Low levels of demand at times means that both vehicles are not always fully utilised.</p> <p>Low levels of demand result in low vehicle occupancy (over 85% of passenger mileage is taken up with carrying one or two passengers).</p> <p>The service will not be economically viable without DfT grant funding.</p>

A summary of key performance metrics reported in the section above for both Go-Too and FlexiLink are shown in Table 6 (averages for the year-to-date).

Table 6 Key Performance Metrics for FlexiLink and Go-Too

Performance metric	FlexiLink	Go-Too
Monthly average passengers	2,801	1,469
No of passengers per operating hour (annual average)	3.2	2.5
No of passengers per journey (annual average)	4.1	1.3
Vehicle Utilisation (average no trips per operating hour)	0.8	1.9
Weekly operational mileage carrying passengers	N/A	1,220

4. Passenger Perspective – Consultation Results

4.1 FlexiLink Consultation 2023

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, it is acknowledged that FlexiLink has not been operating efficiently or effectively in terms of vehicle utilisation and has therefore not been providing value for money. In response, the Council carried out a consultation on proposals to expand flexible transport services over 8 weeks in August and September 2023. Responses were received from 946 people, approximately 40% of these were from current passengers and 60% from people who are not currently passengers. A summary of key findings is shown in Table 7.

Table 7 FlexiLink Consultation Summary

Proposal	All respondents		Current Passengers		Non-passengers	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
Make the service available to more age groups and regardless of ability	68%	18%	47%	31%	83%	9%
Introduce a fare for concessionary pass holders	40%	44%	30%	54%	46%	38%
Move from door-to-door service to designated pick-up points*	41%	47%	15%	77%	54%	33%

* passengers who are wheelchair users or with restricted mobility would still get a door-to-door service

A majority of all respondents agreed that the FlexiLink service should be available to more age groups and regardless of ability. Views on a proposal to introduce a fare for concessionary pass holders were mixed with 40% overall agreeing and 44% disagreeing. Non-current passengers were more likely to agree (46%) than disagree (38%). Current passengers also generally opposed a move to designated pick-up points to improve the efficiency of the service, with 77% against and only 15% in favour. Again, non-passengers took a different view, with 54% agreeing and only 33% disagreeing.

Respondents were also invited to comment on the proposals. 18 responses were critical of the introduction of a charge, some of which are shown below.

Charging concessions is unfair.
It should continue as a free service for over 65's with a bus pass.
If a charge is introduced, it should be negligible because people may not use service / or less often.
Mondays to Fridays during daytime hours should remain free, evenings and weekends could be chargeable.

No specific question was asked about operating times, but in the comments section respondents shared their views. For example, one respondent wrote:

“The hours of operation are still a constraint, especially the afternoon times reserved for school transport.”

Conclusion 1: the FlexiLink service has very limited eligibility at present and there is general support for it to be available to a wider group of passengers. A majority of current passengers disagree with proposals to introduce a fare for concessionary pass holders and move to designated pick-up points. However, both of these proposals are more acceptable to people who are not currently passengers, with more respondents agreeing than disagreeing.

Respondents were also asked which days of the week they would like to use a revised service. Current passengers were more likely to select fewer options overall compared to non-passengers, for example 47% of current passengers selected one day of the week only, whereas 44% of non-passengers selected the full 7 days. Current passengers generally selected weekdays, with some interest in weekend services. 55% of non-passengers stated that they would be interested in a Saturday service compared to 11% of current passengers and 39% stated they would be

Conclusion 2: current passengers generally selected weekdays with nearly half selecting one day only, which seems likely to reflect current travel patterns. Over half of non-passengers indicate interest in a Saturday service.

interested in a Sunday service compared to 8% of current passengers.

When asked about operating times, weekday between 09.30 - 14.30 was by far the most popular time (84% of all respondents selected this option, 92% of current passengers and 79% of non-passengers). Very few current passengers showed interest in travelling at other times. Non-passengers showed more interest, with 44% selecting Saturday (07:00 - 21:00), 37% weekday early evening (16:30 - 19:00), 33% Sunday (09:00 - 18:00) and 23% weekday late evening (19:00 - 21:00).

Conclusion 3: responses to the questions on operating days and times indicate that attracting new passengers will be key to growing the use of the service.

When asked about booking procedures, 88% of current passengers were more likely to book the FlexiLink service via telephone with 12% preferring to book via a website or mobile app. Preferences were reversed among non-passengers, with 57% preferring to book via a website or mobile app and only 43% by telephone.

Conclusion 4: current passengers show a strong preference for telephone booking, which reflects the age profile of users. Non-passengers show a preference for mobile and online bookings, similar to the preferences of Go-Too users.

Feedback on journey purpose showed a marked contrast with usage of the current service, with respondents being able to select up to three options. Journey records indicate that 68% of current FlexiLink passengers use it for shopping, 20% for visiting clubs and day centres, 5% for general social activity, 4% for health-related travel and 3% for other purposes. The consultation findings are summarised in Table 8 below.

Table 8 FlexiLink Consultation on Journey Purpose

What would you most like to use FlexiLink for?	Current Passengers	Non-passengers	All respondents
Travelling to/from shops	81%	64%	69%
Health appointments such as visiting the hospital / doctor / dentist	65%	67%	65%
Connecting to other transport e.g., to train / other bus services	15%	40%	30%
Visiting leisure / recreational facilities	16%	22%	21%
Visiting friends / relatives	12%	16%	16%
Visiting community / day centres	16%	14%	16%
Visiting rural walks / attractions	8%	12%	10%
Travelling to/from a place of work	2%	8%	5%
Other	4%	6%	5%

There were also some comments in the survey which give an indication of the varying level of awareness of the service and that there is a latent ridership who have not yet experienced the service for themselves.

Let people know about the service, needs to be well advertised and promoted. This is the first time I have heard of FlexiLink. It is underused as people don't know about it.

More publicity / advertise more widely as not many people are aware of the service / not heard of the service before. More understanding of the service and the eligibility criteria.

About half of those attending [an unnamed group] had heard of FlexiLink but none had used it.

4.2 Go-Too Survey 2024

The Go-Too service has been well received by the community in which it operates (south and west of Nantwich). It is acknowledged that the service has a low number of passengers per journey and consequently a high cost per passenger journey. Therefore, it cannot be sustained in its current form. However, there are some good lessons learnt which can be applied more widely across the borough.

Some headline findings from a passenger survey carried out in February 2024 (which attracted 281 responses) are as follows:

- 80% of respondents rated the service for its convenience, 64% for the locations served and 58% for its affordability

- 73% said it improved access within the area and 56% had benefited from improved social activities as a result of travelling with Go-Too
- 69% of riders would like the operational area to be extended (especially to Crewe rail station and Leighton Hospital)
- 60% said that their most frequent use of Go-Too was for leisure, 11% for commuting, 11% for “daily errands” (e.g. shopping or bank) and 10% to connect to public transport services. However, 23% also reported that they had connected to other forms of transport on their last Go-Too journey.
- 41% would have used a private car if the Go-Too bus was not available
- 30% of respondents used the service monthly, 25% weekly and 9% daily
- Only 19% of respondents hold a Concessionary Travel Pass

The most popular time to use the service was 13:00 - 16:00, selected by 55% of respondents. Other popular travel times were 16:00 - 19:00 (49% of respondents) and 10:00 - 13:00 (44%). Over 29% of respondents said they use the service between 07:00 - 10:00, a time period most likely to be associated with travel to work, education or training.

Conclusion 5: Go-Too is popular with service users; many depend on it, and it is mainly used by fare-paying passengers. However, without a replacement for the DfT funding, it is not possible to continue it in its present form and a different way of delivering flexible transport is required.

4.3 Bus Service Review Consultation 2024

Building on the results from the FlexiLink consultation in 2023, further consultation was undertaken in May and June 2024, as part of the wider bus service review. 2,115 responses were received. Responses to proposals to modify flexible transport services were positive on the whole.

All respondents were asked to select three reasons why they think flexible transport should operate. The top four reasons given were:

1. To serve rural areas where no other public transport exists (86%)
2. To provide transport for those physically unable to use timetabled bus services (76%)
3. To serve urban areas where no other public transport exists (50%)
4. To provide a feeder service to other transport services (40%)

Respondents were asked whether they use either of the current flexible transport services that operate within Cheshire East. 15% of respondents (301) used the FlexiLink service and 9% (169) used the Go-Too service. Those who used either FlexiLink or Go-Too were asked if they have any other transport available if they could not use FlexiLink or Go-Too, 40% stated they do whereas 55% do not.

Respondents were asked whether they agreed with a proposal is to combine the FlexiLink and Go-Too services into a single, pre-bookable service (details are provided in the following section). Responses are shown in Figure 9.

Overall, 59% of all respondents agreed with the proposed change to the flexible transport service and 9% disagreed. Those who are current passengers of the FlexiLink service were more likely to agree with the proposal (73% agreed whilst 8% disagreed) compared to those who are current passengers of the Go-Too service (51% agreed whilst 29% disagreed).

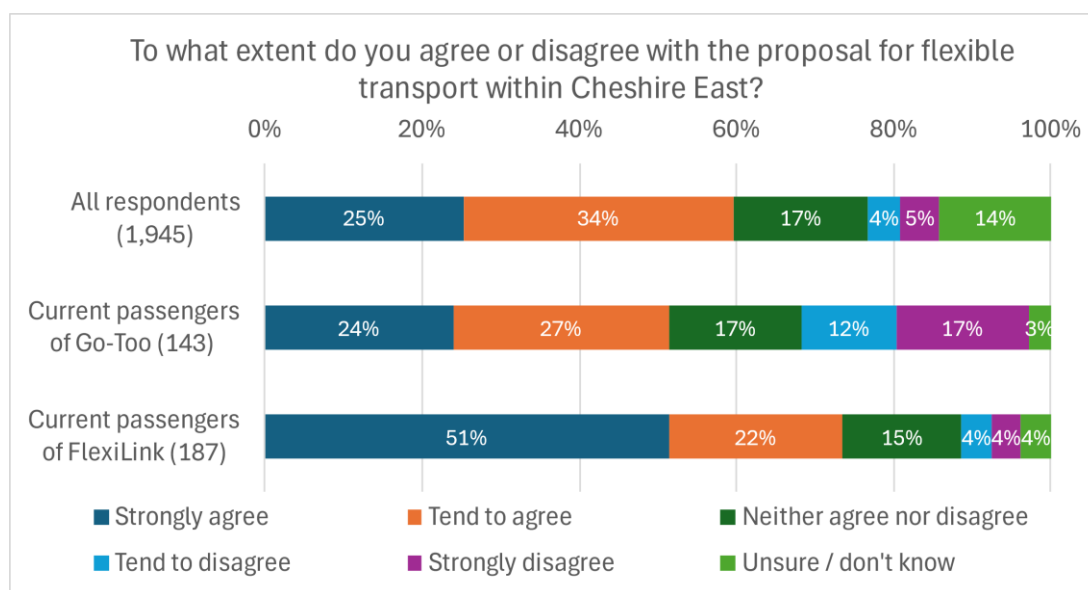


Figure 9 Consultation Response on Proposed Changes to Flexible Transport Services

Respondents who disagreed with the proposals were asked why this was the case. 230 respondents chose to leave a comment, which were coded into overall themes and sub themes. The most common concerns about the proposals were:

- Flexible transport is too expensive / needs to be affordable, mentioned by 51 respondents.
- Hours are too restrictive, 40 mentions.
- Concern over prebooking, booking online and pick- up points, 27 mentions.

Some of the detailed comments on affordability are shown below.

Needs to be affordable to those on low income.
The cost would put me off.
Suggest fares be in line with current price cap.
There shouldn't be a charge for elderly people who can't use normal service.
Concessionary travel must be available to pass holders.

Some of the detailed comments on operating hours are shown below.

Should be available before 9am people need to get to work before this time.
Needs to operate at least 8am-10pm.
Flexibility should mean available all day.
Extended hours of operation and connections to key destinations would greatly enhance the offering and gain greater patronage.
FlexiLink ends too early in the afternoon; an extended service would be welcome.
Flexible transport needs to run throughout the day and not have gaps, makes it an 'inflexible' service which defeats the point.

When asked about the impact of the proposals on their usage of flexible transport, 14% of respondents stated that they would use it for the first time if the proposed change occurred, 15% would use it more whereas only 3% would use it less, as shown in Figure 10. Encouragingly 47% of those who currently use FlexiLink stated that they would use flexible transport more if the proposal was approved. 33% would use the service for the same amount whilst 5% would use it less. Currently Go-Too users were however less likely to use flexible transport more often: 26% stated that they would use it more, 31% for the same amount, whilst 19% would use it less.

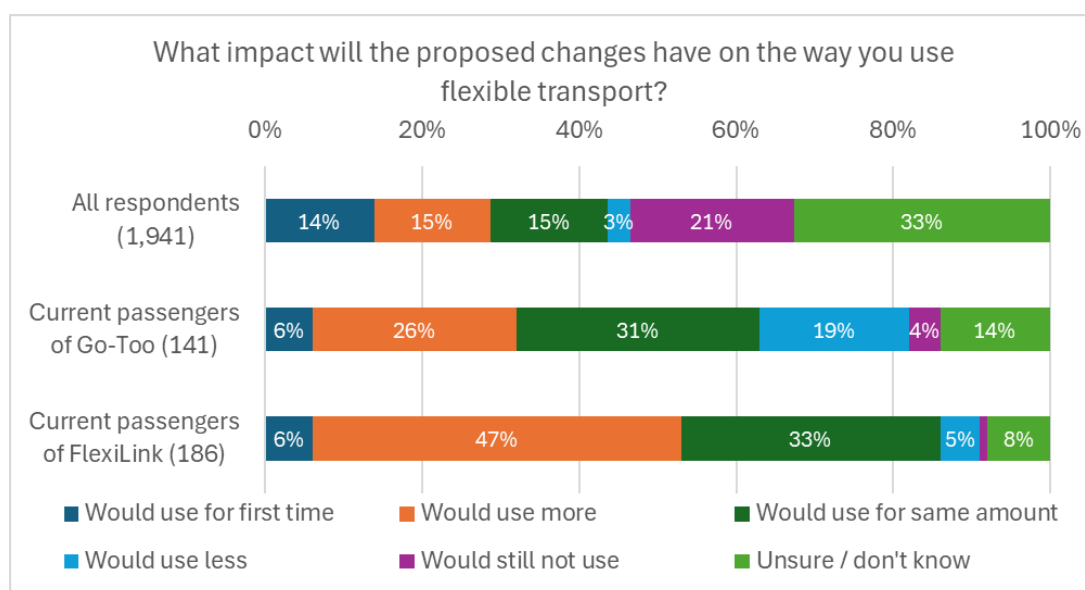


Figure 10 Consultation Response on the Impact of Proposed Changes on Usage

Some respondents made comments on the Go-Too service in their responses to the proposals. Some of these are shown below.

Go-Too operates until 9pm on a Saturday.
The Go-Too bus is a lifeline for a child to get to school and back.
Go-Too should be expanded upon and made more available
The Go-Too service is excellent and has opened up a lifeline for rural communities.
The major obstacle is that it is not integrated with other key transport hubs so utilising it as an alternative to the car is not possible. Extended hours of operation and connections to key destinations would greatly enhance the offering and gain greater patronage.

Conclusion 6: Flexible Transport services are seen as important for those with no alternative travel options. The majority of respondents agree with the proposals including most of those who currently use the services. However, those respondents who would be most affected by the proposals were more likely to disagree. These included concessionary pass holders who would have to pay, people in the Go-Too area who would have a reduced service and people who would have to walk to a pick-up point.

4.4 Summary

- Go-Too is popular with service users; many users depend on it, and it is mainly used by fare-paying passengers
- However, Go-Too patronage is low and the occupancy on most trips is 1 or 2 passengers
- The FlexiLink service has very limited eligibility at present and there is general support for it to be available to a wider group of passengers
- It is not cost-effective to continue financial support for flexible transport services in their current form
- The FlexiLink operating hours are seen as too restrictive and there is demand for earlier and later services
- A majority of current FlexiLink passengers disagree with proposals to introduce a fare for concessionary pass holders and move to designated pick-up points. However, both of these proposals are more acceptable to people who are not currently passengers.
- In the Bus Services Review consultation, the majority of respondents agree with the proposals including most of those who currently use the services. However, those respondents who would be most affected by the proposals were more likely to disagree.

5. National Best Practice

5.1 Overall Summary

A review of DRT services in England and Wales has shown that there are a range of services operating in various rural locations. Specific details of service operation vary from location to location. A summary of key attributes is shown in Table 9 below.

All of the services reviewed, with the exception of itravel in Cheshire West, operate on Saturdays and half of them operate on Sundays. Operating hours at weekends can be shorter than on weekdays, though nearly half of the services reviewed operate the same hours every day. In the case of HertsLynx, services operate until 23:30 on Fridays and Saturdays, much later than Mondays to Thursdays, when operations finish at 19:00. The weekday start time for most of the services is between 06:00 and 07:00, with the exception of ArrivaClick in Liverpool, which starts at 08:05.

No services for which information is available online offer a door-to-door service for all travellers. Most collect passengers from and drop them off at pick-up points or virtual bus stops. ArrivaClick in Kent and Liverpool operates a corner-to-corner service. Pick-up points are usually at the corner closest to the pick-up location requested, where traffic is flowing in the direction of travel, but passengers may be asked to walk up to two streets to meet the vehicle.

A little over half of the services which were analysed use some form of distance-based or zonal pricing. Approximately half of the services for which information is available offer discounts for younger travellers. Most of the services for which information is available allow concessionary pass holders to travel free of charge, although some, such as Go2now in Sevenoaks and West Midlands Bus On Demand in Coventry charge pass holders a discounted fares.

Key attributes which were considered in the development of the recommended proposals include:

- Most other DRT services operate in the morning peak period
- Most other DRT services use a network of pick-up points, rather than offering a door-to-door service
- Most other DRT services allow concessionary pass holders to travel free of charge.

Table 9 DRT Services Operating in England and Wales - Key Service Attributes

Service	Area	Days	Hours	Collect / pick-up	Pricing	Free for concessions?
ArrivaClick	Ebbsfleet, Kent	Mon - Sun	06:00 - 01:00 (Mon - Sat) 06:00 - 24:00 (Sunday)	Nearest street corner	Distance-based fares from £1	Information not available
ArrivaClick	Liverpool (Speke area)	Mon - Sat	08:05 - 17:15 (weekdays) 08:45 - 17:15 (Saturday)	Nearest street corner	Distance-based fares from £1	Information not available
Callconnect	Lincolnshire	Mon - Sat	Information not available	Info not available	Information not available	Yes
Connecting Communities	Suffolk	Mon - Sat	07:00 - 19:00	Info not available	Average bus fare costs for journeys of the same or equivalent distance.	No
DigiGo	Essex (region round Braintree & Chelmsford)	Mon - Sun	06:00 - 22:00 (weekdays) 07:00 - 22:00 (weekends)	Virtual bus stops	Distance bands, adults £2.50 - £8 for over 6 miles, £2 cap applies, discount for Under 18s	Yes
Essex DaRT	Essex	Mon - Sun	06:00 - 20:00	Info not available	Distance bands, adults £2.50 - £8 for over 10 miles, £2 cap, discount for 11-18s, family tickets	Information not available
Go2now	Kent (Sevenoaks)	Mon - Sun	06:00 - 19:00	Bus stops	Distance bands, adults off-peak £2.40 - £14.40 for over 10 miles, peak £3.50 - £15.50 for over 10 miles	ENCTS 50% discount off-peak, young persons & scholars not accepted
HertsLynx	Hertfordshire (North & East Herts,	Mon - Sun (less in 3	07:00 - 19:00 (Mon-Thurs), 07:00 - 23:30	Virtual bus stops	£2 adults (capped)	Yes

	Dacorum & 3 Rivers)	Rivers & Dacorum)	(Fri/Sat), 10:00 - 16:00 (Sun & Bank Holidays)			
itravel	Cheshire West (northeast of Borough)	Mon - Fri	07:00 - 19:00 (excluding Bank Holidays)	Info not available	£2 single (£3 without cap) and half fare for under 19s	Yes
MK Connect	Milton Keynes	Mon - Sun	06:00 - 22:00 (Mon-Sat) & 09:00 - 18:00 (Sun & Bank Holidays)	Virtual bus stops	£4.10 in peak (06:00-09:00, 14.00-17.00), £2.90 other times. £1.20 for All in 1 MK cards	Yes, after 09:30 & all weekend
Tees Flex	Tees Valley - Redcar, Hartlepool, Stockton & Darlington	Mon - Sat	07:00 - 20:00	Virtual bus stops	Distance bands, adults £1 - £4 for over 10 miles, returns & 50% fares for under-19s	Yes, after 09:30 & all weekend
West Midlands Bus On Demand	Coventry	Mon - Sun	06:00 - 23:00 (Mon-Fri), 08:00 - 23:00 (Sat), 08:00 - 15:30 (Sun)	Info not available	Distance bands, adults £2.50 - £7 for over 10 miles (crow flies), discount for Under 18s	From £1 - £2.50 for over 10 miles (crow flies)
fflecsi bus	Various rural locations in Wales. Details for Conwy Valley	Mon - Sat	06:30 - 19:00	Pick-up points	Zonal pricing, adult all-day singles £1 or £2. Multi-trip carnets, weekly & monthly tickets sold in some locations	Yes

6. Case for Change

6.1 Lessons Learned

A number of “lessons learned” can be drawn from the operation of the Go-Too pilot which have informed the development of the new proposal and will influence further detailed planning over the next few months. These include:

6.1.1 Maximising Passengers per Journey

Maximising the number of passengers per journey is an essential element in the efficiency of the operation but is difficult to achieve in practice. The routing and scheduling software used by Go-Too helps to achieve this, whereas FlexiLink is currently a manual operation. The Go-Too team has tried a number of algorithms to determine the level of deviation from the initial route which is permitted (either in distance or time) to pick up more passengers and thereby increase passenger loadings. This experience will be very useful in operating the new service.

Passengers specify a departure or arrival time when booking a trip. Some trips are time-critical (e.g. for an appointment or to interchange with another transport service), but most are not. If passengers can be encouraged to vary their departure time by a few minutes, it facilitates trip aggregation (and thereby increases passenger loadings) but is a difficult balance to strike.

6.1.2 Communication

Communication of exactly what DRT is (and is not) proved difficult at the start of the Go-Too operation. This will be required again to a much larger cohort of people if a single integrated service is rolled out borough wide.

6.1.3 Eligibility for Door-to-Door Service

Users with limited mobility are provided with a door-to-door service and extra time is allowed for in the journey schedule for wheelchair passengers to board and alight. Determining which passengers are eligible for this is not straightforward and there have been several instances where able-bodied passengers have been wrongly categorised as having limited mobility. This significantly increases the time taken for each journey, adds to costs, and reduces the number of other passengers that can book the service. Finding a way to accurately and fairly categorise who is eligible for a door-to-door service will be essential in maintaining the efficiency of the operation.

6.2 SWOT Analysis

Table 10 below shows an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the flexible transport services in Cheshire East, along with the opportunities and threats.

Table 10 SWOT Analysis of Flexible Transport Services in Cheshire East

Strengths	Weaknesses
FlexiLink provides travel independence to elderly and disabled people, giving access to social and recreational	Low levels of demand at times resulting in under-utilised vehicles. FlexiLink operating hours constrained by sharing fleet with SEND transport, so

<p>opportunities, reducing the impacts of loneliness and social isolation.</p> <p>Go-Too provides travellers with public transport in a sparsely populated rural area.</p> <p>Go-Too automated routing and scheduling software provides a passenger interface for booking and vehicle tracking and maximises efficiency of operations.</p>	<p>cannot operate in morning peak or mid-afternoon.</p> <p>Go-Too operating area fairly small (to allow pilot project to operate with 2 vehicles), so services do not extend to the hospital or rail station in Crewe.</p> <p>FlexiLink services do not have access to routing and scheduling software.</p>
Opportunities	Threats
<p>Combining operations into a single service available to all age groups (where no alternative and/or suitable public transport is available) would be simpler and useable for all travellers.</p> <p>Using automated online booking system, routing and scheduling software for all services.</p> <p>Replace poorly performing fixed route services with flexible transport.</p> <p>Extend the operating times beyond the current FlexiLink times to provide a better service.</p> <p>Increase efficiency by collecting and dropping off able-bodied passengers at identified pick-up points rather than operating a door-to-door service.</p>	<p>Demand may not be sufficient to make service cost-effective and financially sustainable.</p>

7. Recommended Proposal

7.1 Recommended Provision

Careful consideration has been given to the blend between fixed route and flexible transport services. There are many lessons learnt from the Go-Too pilot project which can be applied across the borough and there are clear opportunities to modernise the FlexiLink service and respond to the findings of the recent consultation results.

The consultation proposal was to combine the FlexiLink and Go-Too services into a single, bookable service from the end of March 2025, to extend the benefits of flexible transport to all those travelling in the borough who do not have a viable public transport service available to them.

The recommended proposal is to operate a new flexible transport service for a trial period of two years. Whilst our experience of operating both FlexiLink and Go-Too will be very useful, there are a number of “unknowns” about the level of demand across the borough, the hours of operation (i.e. morning peak), the proposed operating areas (i.e. vehicle distribution across the borough), fare structure and procurement arrangements. Operating the service as a fixed-term trial will enable the service to be further developed, refined and improved. See Table 11 for details.

Table 11 Recommended Provision for New Flexible Transport Service

Proposal	Description	Justification	Next Step
1	Available to all age groups ²	Consultation data	Implementation
2	09:30 - 14:30 weekdays	Scope to grow patronage	Implementation
3	16:30 - 21:00 weekdays	Providing greater travel choice	Implementation
4	09:00 - 18:00 Saturdays		Implementation
5	Booked using online app, or by telephone	Go-Too experience Enables automatic routing and scheduling	Implementation
6	Designated pick-up points ³	Required for efficient operation. Go-Too experience	Implementation
7	£4 full fare with reduction for concessionary pass holders	Provides value for money compared to taxi fare	Implementation

² where no alternative and/or suitable public transport is available

³ or offer a door-to-door service to those with limited mobility

Proposal	Description	Justification	Next Step
8	Free travel for concessionary pass holders after 09:30 on weekdays	Required by conditions of BSIP+ funding Consultation feedback has shown opposition to charging pass holders	Under investigation
9	Replacement for 70 Service (Nantwich – Bunbury & Bulkeley) and areas affected by 72 and 73 route consolidation (Burleydam & Lightwood Green)	Fixed route services have very low utilisation and will be withdrawn by the operator from September. Demand responsive services will provide greater flexibility to travellers.	Implementation

One element of the proposals is still to be finalised, as shown in Table 12.

Table 12 Proposal Under Investigation

Proposal	Description	Justification	Next Step
10	Morning peak journeys before 09:30 weekdays (would require delivery of SEND transport services separately from DRT)	Serve passengers travelling to work, education and training. In line with National Best Practice	Under investigation

Fixed bus routes would be coded into the booking system, to ensure that flexible transport did not compete for passengers with timetabled bus services. The booking system would use routing and scheduling software which would automatically reject a trip request where there is already a viable public transport option.

As with the existing Go-Too service, passengers would board and alight at a network of pick-up points, which would typically be existing or disused bus stops, as well as a number of “virtual bus stops” which would be created in areas where few bus stops exist. These would be clearly visible in the booking app. Passengers with limited mobility would receive a door-to-door service, as with Go-Too at present.

A summary of the key attributes of the proposed new service, in comparison to the existing existing FlexiLink and Go-Too services, is shown in

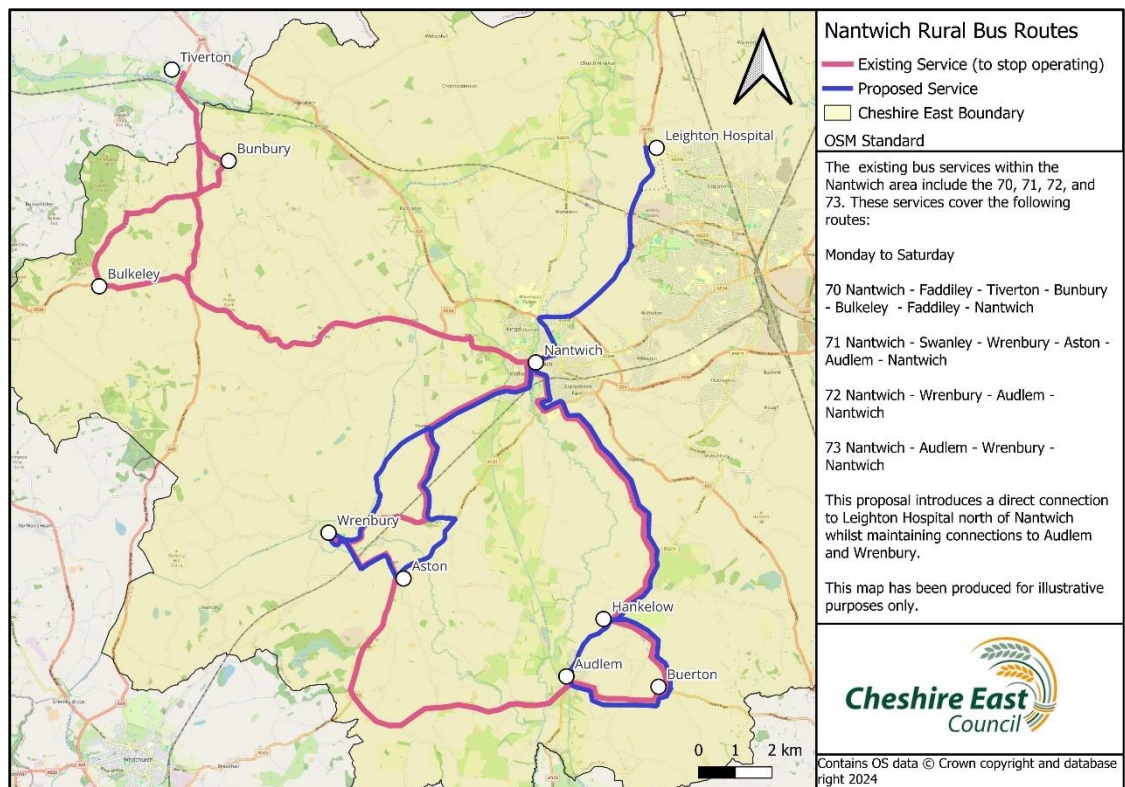
Table 13.

Table 13 Key Attributes of the Flexible Transport Services

	FlexiLink	Go-Too	New service
Operating Area	All of Cheshire East	Rural area south and west of Nantwich	All of Cheshire East
Eligibility	Over 80, or disabled, or have no available public transport	All travellers in the operating area	All travellers who have no viable public transport service available
Operating Times	Weekdays 09.30 – 14.30	Monday to Saturday 07.00 – 21.00	Weekdays 09.30 – 14.30 & 16:30 – 21:00; Saturday 09.00 – 18.00
Fare Cost	£3 per journey, free for concessionary pass holders	£3 per journey, £2 for concessionary pass holders	£4 per journey, less for concessionary pass holders
Booking Process	Telephone or email	Online, phone app or telephone	Online, phone app or telephone
Passenger Access	Door-to door service	Pick-up points	Pick-up points

7.2 Implications for Passengers on 70, 72 and 73 Bus Services

The proposed flexible transport service would extend public transport services to the significant numbers of people who need to travel in the more rural parts of the borough where the operation of fixed-route bus services is not economically viable. In particular, it would provide a replacement service for current users of the 70, 72 and 73 bus services, who will be affected by the first of the Bus Service Review proposals. This recommends the withdrawal of the 70 service and changes to the 72 and 73 routes to remove the section which serves Burleydam and Lightwood Green (see map below).



It is recognised that the Bunbury area will be particularly affected by the loss of the 70 service and changes relative to the existing Go-Too service (reduced hours of operation and fare increase). It may be feasible to have a dedicated vehicle operating a semi-fixed route into Nantwich on a Thursday (market day) and on Saturday (which has the highest demand on both the 70 and Go-Too services). The potential requirement for registration of such a service and implications for concessionary pass holders are still being considered. Many Bunbury residents need access to Tarporley, which is outside of the borough. The simplest solution may be to interchange with the scheduled 84 service at the Bunbury Road stops in Alpraham and the best ways to facilitate this are also still being considered.

8.Future Delivery Models - Options

8.1 Introduction

Sharing the vehicle fleet with SEND school transport services (as with the current FlexiLink service) would make efficient use of current resources and share the operating costs. The proposed operating times would be significantly extended beyond the current FlexiLink times in weekday afternoons and evenings, and on Saturdays. However, it would not operate before 09:30 on weekdays, at a time when passengers who would use the service to get to work, education or training are most likely to travel. There are a number of other potential procurement options which would enable a wider range of operating models – these are set out below.

8.2 Current Fleet - Shared with SEND Home to School Transport

Sharing the vehicle fleet with SEND school transport services (as with the current FlexiLink service) would make efficient use of current resources and share the operating costs between the People and Place Directorates. It would also be relatively straightforward, as it would be a continuation of existing arrangements. However, the integration of the two services places considerable constraints on the operating hours for flexible transport. Notably, services could not start until 09:30 on weekdays and would not be available between 14:30 and 16:30 on weekdays. As can be seen from the [National Best Practice](#) section, the majority of flexible transport services in other parts of the country start much earlier in the day and operate throughout the day.

8.3 Current Fleet - Dedicated Flexible Transport

The vehicle fleet could be delivered using existing arrangements which would be used solely for flexible transport. Separate arrangements would then need to be made for the 86 SEND pupils who are carried in the current minibus fleet.

This would provide a much greater degree of flexibility in terms of operating hours but would require the full costs to be borne by the Place Directorate, instead of the current shared arrangement.

8.4 Current Fleet - Dedicated SEND Home to School Transport

The vehicle fleet could be delivered using existing arrangements which would be used solely for the 86 SEND pupils who are carried in the current minibus fleet. This would require all the associated costs to be borne by the People Directorate (instead of the current shared arrangement) and would require a separate solution to be found for flexible transport services.

8.5 Open Market Tender for Flexible Transport Services

Inviting tenders for the supply of vehicles and operation of the service by a commercial operator would take away the risks and responsibilities of day-to-day operation from the Council and could deliver several benefits, including:

- Market tests the provision of flexible transport to ensure value for money

- Delivery by an established operator may bring greater flexibility in terms of operating times and areas
- A new operator may bring innovative solutions and technologies to improve efficiency and the passenger experience
- The contract could include a range of performance metrics and potentially penalties for non-compliance to help to ensure a high standard of delivery.

8.6 Innovative Delivery Methods

It may be possible to deliver flexible transport using alternative methods which could include taxibus. This is a type of public transport that operates similarly to a regular bus service but is run by a licensed Hackney Carriage or private hire operator. Taxibus services must be registered with the Traffic Commissioner. Services generally run on set routes and follow a published timetable, which could be one journey a week, or multiple journeys each day. Taxibuses have more flexibility to stop anywhere along the route (or could vary slightly off the main route) to pick up or drop off passengers. Passengers are expected to share the vehicle with other passengers making the trip. Passengers generally have to book the day prior to travel with the nominated operator.

Taxibus services have a number of strengths:

- They offer the potential to combine trips to reduce subsidy costs and fares
- They can make good use of existing taxi and private hire fleets which are lower cost compared to a minibus
- They can complement and/or supplement fixed route bus services e.g. providing early morning and evening and Sunday services when the subsidy costs of these could be prohibitive
- They can complement other modes e.g. interchange at rail/bus stations for longer distance travel
- There is generally scope to provide accessible vehicles.

However, they also have a number of potential weaknesses:

- There may be limitations on the supply of taxi and private hire services in some locations, particularly in more rural areas
- There may be limitations in the availability of taxis and private hire services at busy times, as they may undertake school contract services
- The maximum vehicle size for a taxi is 8 seats
- There can be difficulties in agreeing a suitable scheme with large number of small operators
- There will be set-up costs for a new operation, including any centralised booking facility, marketing, information etc, though the existing booking line operated by ANSA could be repurposed

- The quality and accessibility of vehicles is likely to be variable, although the Council has some influence and control as taxi licensing authority
- Variable quality of drivers and driver training.

9. Conclusion

This report sets out the results of a detailed review of flexible transport provision in Cheshire East and drawing on best practice in other parts of the country.

There has been a thorough review of operational data and two rounds of public consultation to inform and influence the recommended proposal set out in Section 7 [Recommended Proposal](#).

In the coming weeks the service specification will be finalised and delivery models assessed to identify the most cost effective option.