

Appendix 3 – Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) Service Update

Introduction

This appendix supports the report to Highways and Transport Committee on 19 June 2025 seeking approval of the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) delivery plan 2025/26. A key part of the plan is the implementation of a modernised / reconfigured demand responsive transport (DRT) service in Cheshire East.

Proposed Operating Model

In September 2024, the Highways and Transport Committee agreed to:

- Approve the current proposals for a revised supported bus network whereby the Council will:
 - On a trial basis, extend FlexiLink hours of operation to include 16:30-21:00 and provision of a Saturday service (09:00-18:00) and make it available for use by all passengers who do not have access to a fixed-route bus service.
- Delegate authority to the Director of Highways and Infrastructure to:
 - identify the most cost-effective delivery model for flexible transport which also meets the provision for home-to-school special educational needs & disability transport, in consultation with the Director of Education, Strong Start and Integration.

A DRT working group has been redesigning the FlexiLink service in line with approved recommendations, taking the lessons learnt from the Department for Transport (DfT) funded Go-Too pilot project and determining how these can best be applied to a new DRT service.

Proposals are progressing well, with the preferred delivery model being to continue sharing the existing vehicle fleet with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) school transport services to make efficient use of current resources. An overview of the current services and proposed operational model is set out below.

	FlexiLink Service	Go-Too Service	New DRT Service
Operating Area	All of Cheshire East	Rural area south and west of Nantwich	All of Cheshire East
Eligibility	Over 80, disabled, or no public transport	Available to all travellers in the operating area	Available to all travellers in the operating area
Operating Times (DRT)	Monday to Friday, 09:30 – 14:30	Monday to Saturday, 07:00 – 21:00	Monday to Friday 09:30 – 14:30, 16:30 – 21:00, Saturday 09:00 – 18:00
Operating Times (SEND)	Monday to Friday, 07:30 – 09:30, 14:30 – 16:30	N/A	Monday to Friday, 07:30 – 09:30, 14:30 – 16:30

Fare Cost	£3 per journey, free for concessionary pass holders	£3 per journey, £2 for concessionary pass holders	£4 per journey, free for concessionary pass holders
Booking Process	Telephone or email	Mobile phone app or telephone	Mobile phone app or telephone
Operating System	Basic database with limited scheduling – manual routing	Scheduling software & driver app for efficient routing	Scheduling software & driver app for efficient routing
Passenger Access	Door-to-door service	Pick-up points	Pick-up points with a door-to-door service by exception subject to users meeting criteria
Notice Period	From 1 month to 48 hours prior to travel	From 14 days up to 17:00* (telephone); or on-demand (app)	From 14 days up to 17:00* (telephone); or on-demand (app)
No of Vehicles	10 (+ 1 spare)	2 (+ 1 spare)	10 (+ 2 spare to improve reliability)

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

With extended operating hours and deployment across the whole of the borough, a series of mapping tasks are being performed to ensure current demand levels are fully understood, alongside the scope to reach wider communities and improve accessibility. The service will still have limitations and must operate efficiently – creating zones within the borough will be necessary in order to maximise access and deliver a cost-effective service. Consideration is being given to the following:

1. Existing service users – current demand levels
2. Communities impacted by changes to fixed route services (i.e. Bunbury)
3. Primary care access

Whilst the proposed DRT service and booking system will not accept journeys where other bus services are available, it will offer connectivity between communities and key hubs to enable onward travel and widen the potential for bus travel.

The new DRT service will be launched as a two-year trial and the enhancements will be funded by the Department for Transport (DfT) as part of the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) Phase 3 funding (£800k) and Local Bus Grant (£800k).

Next Steps

As we finalise the service redesign to deliver against the objectives of this DRT pilot scheme, we continue to work to the wider delivery programme with an indicative implementation date of autumn 2025. A comprehensive communication strategy is in development to ensure clear lines of communication for both existing and new customers, along with promotional and marketing campaigns to enable borough-wide exposure of the new DRT service.