

CABINET

Date of Meeting	Tuesday, 18 th February 2025
Report Subject	Review of the Community Ring and Ride Transport Service
Cabinet Member	Cabinet Member for Streetscene & Transportation
Report Author	Chief Officer (Streetscene and Transportation)
Type of Report	Operational

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Launched in 2017, the Flintshire Community Ring and Ride Service is a pre-bookable, demand responsive transport service providing accessible door-to-door transport to Flintshire residents who experience difficulty travelling on existing public transport services. The service provides assistance to older people or those with a disability to essential medical services, such as travelling to GP appointments, hospital appointments or other health related appointments (e.g. dentist) for Flintshire residents who are unable to access bus services or do not have alternative transport.

It has recently been highlighted that the costs of providing this service have escalated to an unsustainable level, which is likely to cause a projected overspend, due to an increase in demand and a reported higher number of ineligible journeys being undertaken, which do not meet the criteria of the service. A review of the service is now required to ensure that only eligible journeys are being made, as well as reviewing the current criteria for eligibility to meet the available funding for providing the service.

This report details the methodology for completing the review and seeks approval to implement the recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	Cabinet approves the eligibility criteria for the Community Ring and Ride Service and endorses the need to robustly apply the policy as outlined within this report.
2	Cabinet approves the withdrawal of the Ring and Ride service for those users, who do not meet the eligibility criteria, noting that adequate notice will be provided and signposting to alternative means of transport, such as the Non-Emergency Patient Transport Service (NEPTS) provided by the Welsh Ambulance Service and NHS or to community transport (where available).

3	Cabinet approves the annual registration fee and charges for the service to be increased to achieve a balanced budget position and that an annual review of the service takes place to ensure that the service continues to ensure value for money.
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REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING THE BACKGROUND TO THE REVIEW OF THE FLINTSHIRE COMMUNITY RING AND RIDE TRANSPORT SERVICE
1.01	<p>The Community Ring and Ride Service is a low-cost transport service provided for the local community in response to specific local transport needs. Such transport services are often regarded as an effective, flexible, and affordable solution for addressing the mobility needs of specific individuals. They are intended to connect older people or for those with a disability to access essential medical services, and they can provide an invaluable service to many residents who have difficulty accessing public transport.</p>
1.02	<p>The Flintshire operated Ring and Ride Service was set up in 2017 and it provides a pre-bookable, demand responsive transport service providing accessible door-to-door transport to Flintshire residents for NHS medical appointments, who are unable to use ordinary public transport services (bus, rail) or do not have access to alternative transport arrangements for travel to and from medical appointments within Flintshire, and/or to nominated out of county hospitals i.e. Ysbyty Glan Clwyd, Bodelwyddan, Wrexham Maelor Hospital or Countess of Chester Hospital.</p> <p>The service has continued in its current form since 2017 and has not been subject to review during this time. It is not intended to compete with or replace other services, which provide essential transport services, such as community transport provided by the third sector or non-emergency patient transport, but rather it plugs the gap when these services are not available.</p>
1.03	<p>To be eligible to use the existing service, applicants are required to live in Flintshire and must apply to become a member of the transport scheme. An annual subscription fee of £10 is applicable upon initial registration and registration for the service is completed by the Flintshire Contact Centre to confirm that applicants meet the eligibility criteria for the service. A further charge is made for each booked journey at 45 pence per mile regardless of the distance travelled. Bookings for journeys are made through the Contact Centre and transport is provided by a licensed hackney carriage or private hire operator using a taxi or private hire vehicle, which is subsidised by the Council. Appendix 1 details the current criteria for the service and process followed for assessing applications.</p>
1.04	<p>The Flintshire service is well utilised with 1,139 members having utilised the service since its inception. Since 2020, there have been over 7,000 bookings made for the service with travel arranged to and from a wide range of health-related appointments.</p>

The table below shows the number of registered users of the Ring and Ride Service each year over the last 5 years.

2020/2021	253
2021/2022	255
2022/2023	330
2023/2024	415
2024/2025	427

As a result of the increased number of users and demand for the service, the costs for running the service have increased significantly and are projected to exceed the budget available for 2024-2025. The current costs for operating the Ring and Ride Service against the budget available are shown below.

Current Budget 2024/2025	£40,308
Projected Costs for the Service	£80,596
Shortfall	-£40,288

1.05 In response to the projected revenue budget monitoring 2024/25 overspend position (as at month 6), the Streetscene & Transportation portfolio has been required to produce a list of measures within an action plan to improve the financial position by the end of the financial year. The review of the Ring and Ride Service is included within the action plan.

1.06 Upon initial review by the portfolio, it has been found that a number of the journeys being booked were not deemed to be eligible under the current criteria for using the Ring and Ride Service, and as such, it has been determined that the increased usage can be attributed to the following: -

- Journeys to non-NHS appointments
- Journeys to locations outside of the service limitations (out of county0).
- Journeys used by residents with options to travel by alternative means (i.e. private transport, available bus services or access to the Welsh Ambulance Non-Emergency Patient Transport Service).

As a result, a more detailed review is being undertaken through the use of a customer survey, which has been sent to all registered users to determine continued eligibility of the service and identify whether any changes are required (see **Appendix 2** for a copy of the survey).

1.07 To address the issue of non-eligible users registering for the service and, in an attempt to tighten the controls for the booking process for journeys and bring the expenditure back in line with the budget, the following additional measures are being introduced: -

- Eligibility criteria amended to require evidence to demonstrate that the applicant is unable to access or use ordinary public transport or alternative means of transport to attend medical appointments (see **Appendix 3**).
- An e-form has been developed. The new e-form will be required to be completed by the Contact Centre upon registration and will ensure that only applicants who are eligible for the service are permitted to be registered.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In addition, the Integrated Transport Unit (ITU) has recently carried out further training with the Contact Centre to ensure that they are aware of the process to be followed, and only eligible residents are registered for the service and booking requests meet the criteria.
1.08	<p>The review has also identified that bookings have been accepted for medical facilities that are not on the nominated list of hospitals named within the criteria, for instance journeys to NHS medical appointments at the Abergele Eye Hospital, NHS Orthopaedic Hospital in Gobowen, Nightingale House in Wrexham and other NHS appointments in Ruthin, Denbigh and Rhyl.</p> <p>Whilst on the surface it may appear that such appointments could be permitted under the Ring and Ride Service criteria, journeys to these facilities are not deemed to be eligible, as they are not located within Flintshire and are not one of the three nominated general hospitals. It is intended that no journeys to any facilities other than the three nominated general hospitals will be permitted in the future.</p>
1.09	<p>Although it is not possible to continue providing journeys to these facilities due to the budget pressures incurred and the fact that they do not meet the eligibility criteria, it is important to note that the risk of removing this transport may result in vulnerable people who currently utilise the service, not being able to access medical appointments as they may have become accustomed to, and having to seek alternative travel arrangements. It is therefore recommended that only eligible requests when assessed in accordance with the agreed eligibility criteria are approved going forward.</p> <p>Subject to approval, communication will be issued to service users to inform them of the eligibility criteria for the service and provide advice and guidance to signpost them to alternative means of transport, as detailed within this report. However, it is recognised that the increase in demand for this subsidised transport service could correlate to the increased cost of living affecting the affordability of goods and services bought by households.</p>
1.10	<p>The Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust provides a Non-Emergency Patient Transport Service for patients across Wales who are unable, for medical reasons, to make their own way to and from their appointments at clinics, hospitals and day centres. This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outpatients appointments; • Dialysis and Oncology treatment; • Day centre and psycho-geriatric clinics; • Planned admissions and discharges including inter-hospitals transfers <p>It is a vital resource to help those patients who rely on the service, and it should not be used by those without a medical need. Please note that a need for treatment does not automatically imply a need for transport. There is an eligibility process that all patients are required to go through to ensure that their needs are appropriate for the service.</p> <p>For patients who are found non-eligible, there is an Alternative Transport Team that can discuss transport options in their area. Eligibility for NEPTS is based on meeting the following criteria: -</p>

- You are receiving regular dialysis or cancer treatment;
- You require a stretcher for the journey;
- You require oxygen for the journey;
- You need to travel in your own wheelchair;
- You are unable to walk without continual support;
- You are unable to use public transport because you have a medical condition that would compromise your dignity;
- You have severe communication difficulties or;
- You will experience side effects as a result of the treatment for your condition.

For more details, information is available on the Welsh Ambulance Service's website detailed below or by telephone 0300 123 2303.

<https://ambulance.nhs.wales/services/non-emergency-patient-transport-service-nepts/>

1.11

Whilst the withdrawal of ineligible journeys will have a positive effect on the current budget position, recent rises in transport costs (e.g. driver's wages, fuel, insurance etc.) and re-procurement of the service will inevitably still result in a budget deficit and, although the actions proposed are intended to bring the expenditure back in line with the budget, they will not ensure full cost recovery for the service.

To mitigate this budget pressure, the ITU intends to apply for additional funding from the Welsh Government's Community Transport Grant for the 2025/2026 financial year, as it is understood that the Flintshire Ring and Ride Service could be accepted for the grant and deemed to be eligible.

1.12

Finally, as outlined previously, existing service users currently pay an annual registration fee of £10 to become a member of the scheme plus a further charge of 45 pence per mile regardless of the distance. These charges were originally implemented in 2017 and has not been reviewed since this time, despite the rising costs in transport provision. This membership fee remains low when compared to the fees of other similar schemes across the country, which range between £15.00 (Denbighshire) and £20.00 (Cheshire West and Chester).

The charges for journeys also appear low when compared to other schemes. Some schemes charge a rate per mile, typically between £0.50 (plus a minimum fee of £2.50) and £1.20, while others charge a set rate for journeys between set points (e.g. Denbighshire).

It is therefore proposed that the annual membership fee is increased to £20.00 and that a minimum charge of £2.50 is introduced for all journeys not exceeding five miles (similar to the scheme in Cheshire West and Chester) and all journeys exceeding five miles are subject to the minimum charge plus a charge of £0.50 per mile.

The proposed charging structure for the Flintshire Community Ring and Ride Service showing typical fares for the service is included in **Appendix 4** by way of an example.

1.12	Following completion of the procurement exercise, along with an understanding of the number of eligible users following completion of the detailed customer services review, it is proposed to review the annual registration fee in order to seek a balanced budget position.
1.13	<p>A report was presented to the Environment & Economy Overview & Scrutiny Committee on 11th February 2025 on the proposals detailed within this report. The recommendations were supported, and several points were noted by the Committee, which are detailed below and will be applied subject to approval.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion of other transport options e.g. community transport, non-emergency patient transport, fflecsi service, public transport services • Consideration of future options, such as local authority operated services rather than contracted services or use of third sector • Ensuring that it was clear in the criteria that no charge was to be made for guide dogs • Inclusion of single one-way charges as well as return journey charges, which are permissible in the scheme • Annual review of the fees and charges for the service to increase more gradually and incrementally • Monitoring of the usage of the service to ensure that only eligible users are permitted to travel • Provision of the estimated income levels for Cabinet to consider

2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
2.01	<p>As reported to Cabinet in November 2024, the significant projected overspend (and impact on available reserves) continues to be of major concern and needs to continue to be addressed urgently in an attempt to bring expenditure back in line with the approved budget. Based on current projections, the council still has a low level of contingency reserve, which it uses to deal with any significant in-year unforeseen events.</p> <p>As required by Financial Procedure Rules (FPRs), an action plan has been compiled by the Streetscene and Transportation portfolio, which details the measures being put in place to improve the position by the end of the financial year. The measures detailed within this report are intended to ensure that the level of expenditure is brought back in line with the approved budget.</p> <p>Based on the current number of registered users, the increase in membership fee is estimated to increase the income by approximately £4k. The increased income level generated from journeys is more challenging to calculate, due not knowing where customers are likely to come from in the future; however, based on the data for 2024/2025 to date, we estimate that the average fare income will increase by around 11.11%. The income forecasted from fares for journeys is approximately £10k, therefore the increase to fares is expected to yield between £11-12k.</p> <p>The majority of the cost reductions for the service are anticipated to come from the new controls put in place to ensure that only eligible journeys are made in accordance with the approved eligibility criteria for the service, which are estimated to be around a third of all journeys made.</p>

2.02	<p>Revenue: There could be implications for the approved revenue budget for this service for either the current financial year or for future financial years if no action is taken to address the projected overspend. Actions are as follows: -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-procurement of the service is likely to result in further increases in costs. • Review of service criteria and eligibility to reduce costs. • Strict application of the policy following approval • Application to the Community Transport Grant to supplement funding and mitigate against the increased contractor costs. <p>Capital: there are no implications for the approved capital programme for either the current financial year or for future financial years</p> <p>Human Resources: The review, amendment and implementation will be undertaken by the Council's in-house Integrated Transport Unit (ITU). The revised process is not likely to increase the workload for the Customer Contact Centre or administration of the scheme and will improve controls.</p>
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3.00	IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT
3.01	<p>Withdrawing the service from ineligible users, may have an impact on vulnerable people who currently utilise the service, in terms of them not being able to access medical appointments that they may have become accustomed to, and will therefore, need to seek alternative arrangements. Consultation is being undertaken with all registered users of the service, and ineligible users will be signposted to alternative transport solutions.</p>
3.02	<p><u>Alternative Transport Options</u></p> <p>The Non-Emergency Patient Transport Service is for patients across Wales who are unable, for medical reasons, to make their own way to and from their hospital appointments. It is a vital resource to help those patients who need and rely on it and it should not be used as a method of getting to appointments unless deemed eligible to do so.</p> <p>For patients who are found to be non-eligible through the NEPTS eligibility process there are a range of options to consider below for alternative means of transport: -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking family or friends if they can help with transport • Contact my Health Journey: https://myhealthjourney.traveline.cymru/ • Using public transport (it may be possible to claim back the costs of transport from the local health board) • If someone receives Personal Independence Payments (PIP) or has the use of a mobility car – this is intended to be used to help with travel to any appointments. • Visit the NHS 111 Wales webpage and scroll down to 'Not Eligible for NEPTS?' for alternative transport options. https://111.wales.nhs.uk/localservices/ViewLocalService.aspx?id=8173&s=Non-Emergency%20%20Alternative%20Transport

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some people may be able to claim back some or all of the travel costs from the local Health Board, for more information please visit Healthcare Travel Costs Scheme (HTCS) – NHS https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/help-with-health-costs/healthcare-travel-costs-scheme-htcs/
3.02	The increases in membership fees and charges for journeys for those users who remain eligible are deemed to be reasonable and the increase will bring the charges broadly in line with similar schemes in neighbouring local authorities. Additionally, the charges are significantly lower than the normal taxi fares, given that they are subsidised.
3.03	The risk of not implementing the recommendations within this report will result in rising costs beyond the scope of the existing budget, as set out within the Cabinet report on 19 th November 2024, and would add to the pressures for 2025/2026.

4.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED/CARRIED OUT
4.01	Cabinet Member for Streetscene & Transportation.
4.02	With service users via the customer survey and communication.

5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	Appendix 1 – Current Criteria and Eligibility Process.
5.02	Appendix 2 – Copy of Survey to Registered Members of the Current Scheme.
5.03	Appendix 3 – Revised Eligibility Process and Criteria.
5.04	Appendix 4 – Proposed Charging Structure & Example Fares.

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	None.

7.00	CONTACT OFFICER DETAILS
7.01	<p>Contact Officer: Katie Wilby, Chief Officer (Streetscene & Transportation) Telephone: 01352 704530 E-mail: katie.wilby@flintshire.gov.uk</p> <p>Contact Officer: Anthony Stanford, Transport Service Manager Telephone: 07966 430212 E-mail: anthony.stanford@flintshire.gov.uk</p> <p>Contact Officer: Helen Telford, Integrated Transport Unit Manager Telephone: 01352 704531 E-mail: helen.telford@flintshire.gov.uk</p>

8.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
	<p>Community Transport Grant – Grant provided by Welsh Government to deliver transport objectives set out in the Welsh Transport Strategy and the National Transport Finance Plan.</p> <p>Integrated Transport Unit (ITU) – The Council’s in-house transport team, which coordinates transport arrangements for a range of different service needs e.g. community transport, public transport, school transport.</p> <p>NEPTS – Non-emergency patient transport service provided by the Welsh Ambulance Services and NHS Health Board, which provides transport for patients in Wales needing to get to Non-Emergency appointments who have a specific medical need.</p>