

## GREATER MANCHESTER TRANSPORT COMMITTEE BUS SUB-COMMITTEE

Date: Friday 18 March 2022

Subject: Ring and Ride Performance and Recovery Update

Report of: Stephen Rhodes, Customer Director & Interim Head of Bus Services, TfGM

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### Purpose of Report

To note progress in relation to the delivery of Ring and Ride services by Greater Manchester Accessible Transport Ltd (GMATL) and its plans for recovery after Covid.

### Recommendations:

The Committee is requested to note and comment on the contents of the report.

### Contact Officers

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## **Equalities Implications**

N/A

## **Climate Change Impact Assessment and Mitigation Measures**

N/A

## **Risk Management**

N/A

## **Legal Considerations**

N/A

## **Financial Consequences – Revenue**

N/A

## **Financial Consequences – Capital**

N/A

## **Number of attachments to the report:**

N/A

## **Comments/recommendations from Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

N/A

## **Background Papers**

N/A

## **Tracking/ Process**

Does this report relate to a major strategic decision, as set out in the GMCA Constitution?

No

## **Exemption from call in**

Are there any aspects in this report which means it should be considered to be exempt from call in by the relevant Scrutiny Committee on the grounds of urgency?

No

**GM Transport Committee**

N/A

**Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

N/A

## 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Ring and Ride service provides door to door, demand responsive transport to residents of Greater Manchester who find it difficult to use conventional public transport due to disability or mobility issues.

## 2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Ring and Ride service is operated by Greater Manchester Accessible Transport Ltd. (GMATL) and grant funded by TfGM.

- 2.2 The grant is awarded subject to GMATL's compliance with a Service Level Agreement (SLA) which details key service performance standards that must be delivered to ensure the service's social inclusion objectives.

- 2.3 In April 2016, GMATL introduced the following eligibility criteria on Ring and Ride. Passengers can now only use the service if they:

1. hold a TfGM Concessionary Plus Pass (available to those with the following: Severe walking difficulties; registered partially sighted; profoundly or severely deaf; or have been/would be refused driver's license for medical reasons); or
2. hold a TfGM Concessionary Disabled Person Pass (available to the following: registered blind; profoundly deaf and cannot speak/limited speech that is difficult to understand; learning difficulties; cannot use both arms; cannot talk; ex-serviceman or woman with serious walking difficulties as a result of losing a leg; or would be refused driving license as a result of severe and long-term mental health problems); or
3. are 70 years old or over, have mobility issues and hold a TfGM Older Person's Concessionary Pass; or
4. are a TfGM Travel Voucher user; or
5. are an ex-serviceman or woman with serious walking difficulties as a result of losing a leg.

- 2.4 In 2019/20 the grant to GMATL to fund Ring and Ride services was increased to £4.6 million which included £0.3 million to part fund the replacement of up to 31 fleet vehicles. Following the onset of the pandemic, in 2020/21 the grant was reduced to £3.27 million to reflect the lower level of demand, with an additional £170,000 for

lease vehicles. In 2021/22 the grant was £3.5 million with an additional £163,000 for lease vehicles. The grant and additional lease vehicle allocation will remain at £3.5 million with an additional £186,000 for lease costs in 2022/23.

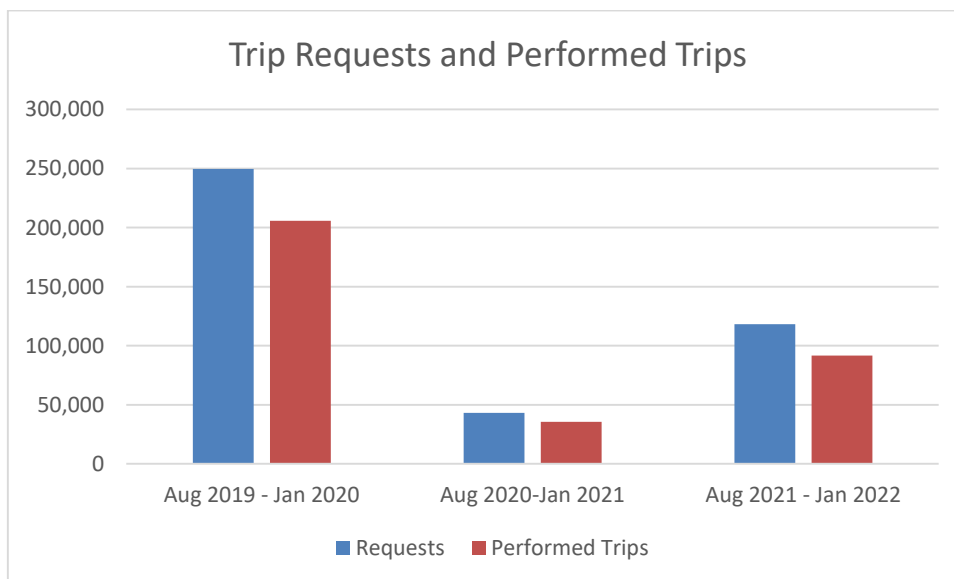
### **3. RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC**

- 3.1 Due to Covid-19 Ring and Ride delivered a significantly reduced service in 2020/21. After initially being suspended in March 2020, in line with other operations across the country, the service did gradually restart with safety restrictions in place. A limited service resumed on 18th May which was aimed at essential journeys and hospital trips. Initial usage of the service was around 2% of pre-Covid levels and by the end of July the level of usage had risen to around 11%.
- 3.2 Normal service for passengers travelling in wheelchairs and those requiring physical assistance resumed from 1st September 2020. In the 2020/21 financial year there were 53,167 trips, which represents 13.6% of pre-Covid patronage (2019/20). By April 2021 patronage levels were around 22% of pre-Covid levels, but the demand steadily rose to 54% by November 2021. There was a slight dip in December due to the concerns around the Omicron variant, but early indicators show that the patronage is likely to be above 50% by February 2022.
- 3.3 The service is currently operating at the usual times (between 8am to 10.45pm Monday to Saturday and 8am to 10.25pm on Sunday) but with reduced vehicle numbers (40, compared to 57 before Covid). This number of vehicles is required to cover the pre-Covid operating times across all areas.
- 3.4 As demand increased, users started to experience very low levels of refusals again (being unable to access a requested journey at booking stage) by October 2021, peaking at 2.5%. This compares to an average of 5.82% in the calendar year pre-Covid. GMATL adjust driver rosters periodically to best reflect vehicle resources; and review schedules to best meet demand. When it is appropriate, more resources will be reintroduced as required.
- 3.5 Since the beginning of the vaccination roll-out in January 2021, Ring and Ride has provided 585 trips to the Etihad Campus and to the various vaccination centres across Greater Manchester. To support the vaccination effort, Ring and Ride relaxed their booking parameters to allow passengers under 70 years of age with a concessionary travel pass to access vaccination centres on a temporary basis. Journey mile limits were also relaxed from 6 miles to up to 10 miles for this purpose.

## 4. IMPACT OF COVID ON RING AND RIDE SERVICES

- 4.1 As of 31st January 2021, there were 7,118 registered Ring & Ride users of which 673 were wheelchair users. This compares to a total of 13,729 registered users and 1,261 wheelchair users when the previous Ring and Ride report was taken to this Sub Committee in March 2021. The reason for this decrease is that GMATL periodically remove non-active users from their database in line with data protection laws. The number of active registered users as of January 2022 (members who have used the service within the previous twelve months) is 3,436 compared to 4,286 in January 2021 and 6,435 in January 2020.
- 4.2 During the six-month period from August 2021 to January 2022 there were 118,169 trip requests and 91,800 trips performed. Trips were up by 88% compared to the same period in August 2020-January 2021 when there were 43,241 trip requests and 35,688 performed trips. Compared to the same period in August 2019- January 2020 (pre-Covid) trips were down by 76% during which time there were 249,788 trip requests and 205,788 performed trips. See Figure 1 for overview.

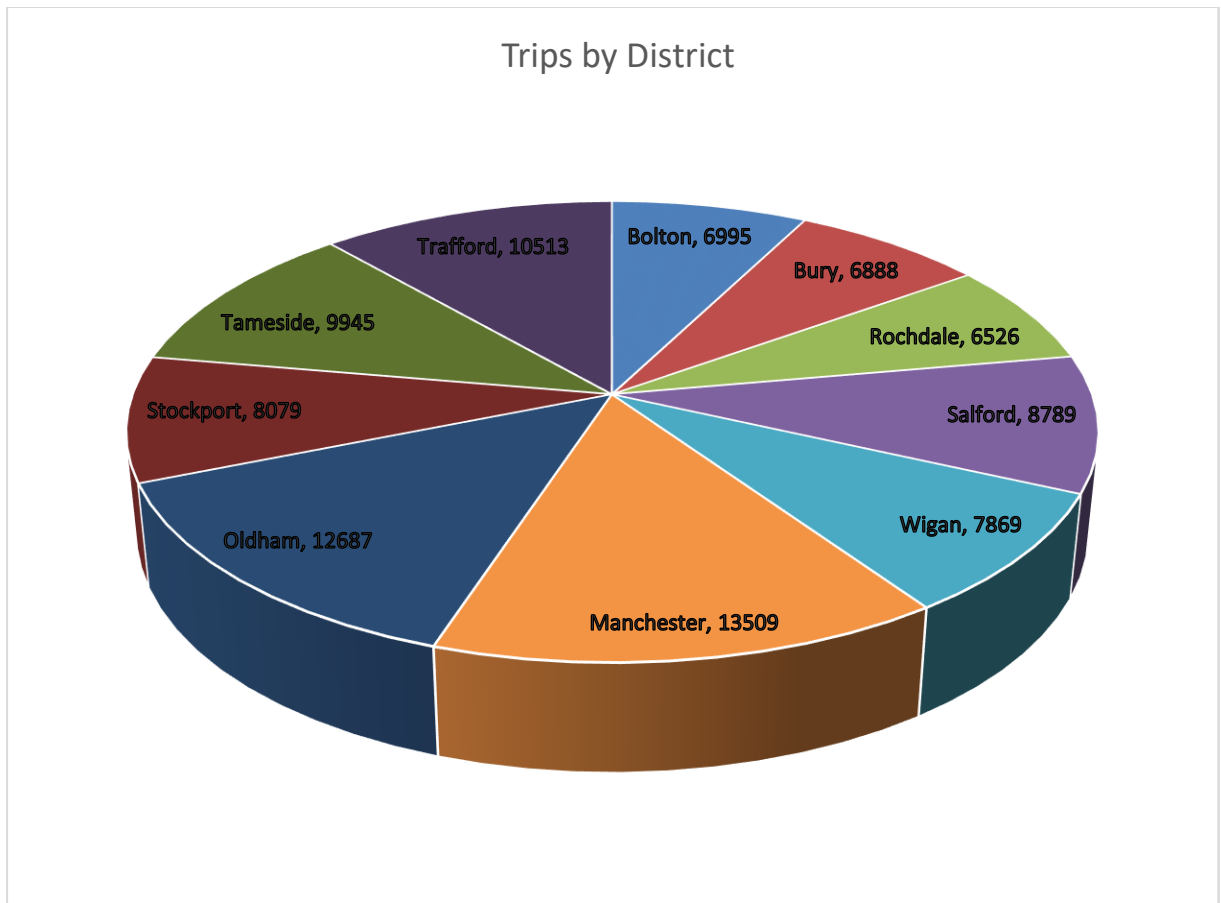
**Figure 1: Trip Requests and Performed Trips, August - January 2019 - 2022**



- 4.3 Cancellation rates between August 2021 - January 2022 were around 23% compared to 19.4% in pre-Covid times (19.4% in financial year 2019/2020). This increase is expected due to changes in government guidelines and plans changing due to Covid related reasons throughout this period.

- 4.4 Between August 2021 and January 2022 wheelchair users accounted for 6,902 trips which represents 7.5% of all trips. This is a proportionate and real terms increase compared with 2,489 wheelchair user trips in the same period in the previous year (6.97% of all trips).
- 4.5. From August 2020 to January 2021, Social journeys was the main reason provided for travel, at 29% of total bookings, followed by Leisure at 25% (Shopping 24%, Health 11%, Education 5%, Employment 3%). Also, the age group that made the most trips was 81-90 at 26% of total bookings and with 31-60 at 24%. In the same period in 2021/22, Social journeys increased to 47%, followed by Leisure at 27% (Shopping 14%, Health 4%, Religious 4%, Education 2%, Employment 1%). This increase is related to the return of regular groups which are largely of a social nature and the focus on essential journeys at the height of the pandemic.
- 4.6 From August 2021 to January 2022 most completed passenger journeys were performed in the Manchester and Oldham districts (13,509 and 12,687 respectively). See Figure 2 for a breakdown of all districts.

**Figure 2: Number of passenger trips for each district between August 21 and January 22.**



## **5. FINANCIAL UPDATE**

- 5.1 As noted above, the grant from TfGM to GMATL in 2020/21 was reduced from £4.6 million to £3.5 million to reflect the reduced passenger demand, and any additional savings were made available for reserves. The 2022/23 grant will remain £3.5 million with an additional £186,000 for vehicle leases. This budget is based on the 2021/22 outturn figure. Should any additional resources be required to meet increased demand, it is anticipated that this will be met by GMATL's reserves.

## **6. RECOVERY PLANNING – NEXT STEPS**

- 6.1 Assessing the recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact on demand remains challenging. With many of the target audience having received or have been offered three or more vaccinations and many restrictions having lifted, the previous six months have seen a return of demand. Trips requests saw a significant increase in the Autumn of 2021 reaching 45% of pre-Covid levels in October, rising to 53% in November and December, dipping to 46% in January and have returned to 51% in February.
- 6.2 In the short term, GMATL propose to retain the fleet at the current level of 40 vehicles and regularly adjust driver rosters to ensure the resources are available where most needed. On current shift output, GMATL estimate that 255,000 trips could be provided next year which represents around 65% of pre-Covid patronage.
- 6.3 Work is being undertaken to both encourage previous customers to return and to attract new customers to the service (see section 7). Should this work result in an increase in demand, resource can be reintroduced.
- 6.4 In the longer term, TfGM are reviewing the current operating model as part of their ongoing Accessible Transport Review. This will involve working with GMATL to closely monitor service recovery and ensure that the resource and operating model can adapt to meet the any long-term changes to demand patterns. It is intended this work will therefore be restarted from April 2022, starting with the outline plan to gauge customer views on returning to the service detailed below.

## **7. ENGAGEMENT AND CONSULTATION**

- 7.1 GMATL have proactively been contacting passengers throughout 2021 and into 2022 to ensure eligible customers know that they can use the service. As well as encouraging use of the service, it will provide information on the correct level of



demand in advance of making any future decisions about longer term funding. In the Autumn GMATL distributed 8,000 leaflets and 400 posters throughout the ten districts and contacted 3,000 lapsed users to ask them whether they would consider using the service again. A commonly cited reason for the drop in usage is the fact that many of the regular group events closed during Covid and have not reopened. Regular bookings currently account for between 25-30% of all trips compared to 45% pre-Covid. Other reasons for reduced use of the service include general changes to travel behaviour following Covid.

- 7.2 GMATL in conjunction with TfGM held an online event for group organisers on 2 March 2022 to provide an update on the service and provide a space for group organisers to ask questions and give feedback. General feedback was that regular group activities are resuming, if not at the same frequency and size as previously. Some difficulties in accessing the right times are starting to materialise due to the reduced vehicle allocation which GMATL together with TfGM are monitoring carefully. Individual issues raised are being followed up by GMATL.
- 7.3 Alongside the passenger forum, TfGM are working with key stakeholders like Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisations to develop a consultation document to gather feedback on the Ring and Ride service. This consultation will feed into the Accessible Transport Review and identify improvements that could be made to the service.
- 7.4 Work has been done to ensure that the Ring and Ride service is supporting all GM communities. The Ring and Ride current user base is fairly representative of the wider GM population across relevant age groups. Of all Ring and Ride users, 92.31% are white compared to 83.8% of the GM population so the white population is over-represented. However, this variance is smaller when considering the ethnic makeup of the older population which makes up the majority of the Ring and Ride service (70.1% of Ring and Ride users are 71 or older). 95.02% of Ring and Ride users over 71 are white compared to 96% of the wider GM population. Officers have identified areas where engagement could be better with some ethnic minority groups and these groups will be included as key stakeholders as part of the consultation. The Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) will be reviewed once consultation is complete, any negative impacts identified from the wider consultation will be incorporated into the EqIA and clear mitigations outlined.

## **8. VEHICLE REPLACEMENT**

- 8.1 GMATL are currently operating with 40 vehicles. 28 of these vehicles are owned by GMATL and will become life-expired between 2025 and 2028. In July 2018, GMTC agreed to TfGM's recommendation that replacement vehicles should be leased rather than bought in the short term. This would allow zero emission technology to mature and allow more flexibility while the operating model of the service was reviewed, through the Accessible Transport review. The remaining 13 vehicles are currently leased and are being extended on a 12-month basis as required, whilst a longer-term fleet replacement strategy, which seeks to realise the zero emission ambitions, is developed.
- 8.2 All the vehicles currently in service have step access and a passenger tail lift at the back for passengers using wheelchairs and those unable to access the steps. In recent years, there have been an increasing number of newer models of powered wheelchair which, for safety reasons relating to not being able to apply the brakes whilst on the passenger tail lift, have been deemed as unsafe for travel on the current Ring and Ride service. GMATL took this decision after much consultation with MiDAS (Minibus Driver Awareness Scheme), health partners and wheelchair manufacturers.
- 8.3 The numbers of passengers unable to travel for this reason has increased from 4 in 2019 to 19 in 2021. To mitigate this problem, GMATL have ordered five low floor vehicles with rear-access ramps on a two-year lease. During this trial, they will contact all passengers who have been affected by this issue to see if they would like to travel. They will also analyse the impact on boarding times for ambulatory and wheelchair passengers as well as carrying out customer satisfaction surveys.

## **9. NEXT STEPS**

- 9.1 TfGM and GMATL will continue to progress the Accessible Transport Review, which will include establishing expected post-pandemic demand, reviewing performance targets and monitoring delivery to ensure the needs of the vulnerable customer base are being met as efficiently as possible.
- 9.2 Once the funding position is better understood, TfGM will work with GMATL to develop a Fleet Replacement Strategy to map out how the service can realise our Zero Emission ambitions as the existing fleet requires replacement.

## **10. RECOMMENDATIONS**

10.1 As noted at the front of the report.

**Stephen Rhodes**

**Customer Director and Interim Head of Bus Services**