

GREATER MANCHESTER TRANSPORT COMMITTEE BUS SERVICES SUB-COMMITTEE

Date: Friday 20th January 2023

Subject: Local Link Performance Update and Accessible Transport Review

Report of: Stephen Rhodes, Bus Director, TfGM

Purpose of Report

To update Members on the existing Local Link provision and areas under consideration as part of the Accessible Transport Review

Recommendations:

Members are asked to note the contents of the report.

Contact Officers

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Equalities Implications

Equalities Impact Assessments will be completed in advance of development and implementation of recommendations identified through the Accessible Transport Review.

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: None

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

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Accessible Transport sector in Greater Manchester is broadly made up of the following services:
 - Ring and Ride
 - Local Link
 - Community Transport
 - Health (Non-Emergency Passenger Transport Services - NEPTS)
 - SEN Schools Transport
- 1.2 Of these, the Ring and Ride and Local Link services are those which are directly funded by TfGM (via grant funding or through award of subsidised services), while TfGM also works to support provision in the other areas.
- 1.3 This report provides a summary update on TfGM's Local Link services, followed by an update on some of the key areas which are being considered as part of the Accessible Transport Review. A detailed report on the Ring & Ride service was provided at the meeting of this Committee on 18 November 2022, where a subsequent update on the Local Link services and the Accessible Transport Review was requested. The focus of this report is on the Local Link services, which, together with the Ring and Ride service, are the elements of demand responsive transport within TfGM's control.
- 1.4 The Local Link services offers a flexible transport solution for local journeys in areas where public transport services are limited. Passengers can book a shared minibus or wheelchair accessible vehicles to travel within one of the Local Link service areas: Dunham Massey, East Manchester, Heald Green, Heywood, Middleton, Partington, Saddleworth and Mossley, Timperley and Wythenshawe.
- 1.5 Local Link is available to anyone travelling within the specified service areas. There are no restrictions on who can use the service; once passengers are registered for the service they can book their journeys by phone or online, between 1 hour and seven days in advance.
- 1.6 TfGM provides the contact centre and booking software. The operators provide the drivers and vehicles at the times specified in the contract. There are currently nine advertised services across five contracts provided by one operator, using 11 vehicles in total. The Local Link services cover approximately 220 square km across Greater

Manchester. Appendix 1 includes a more detailed overview of each service. Services are in place:

1.7 The total operating cost for all five contracts is £1.14 million per annum.

2 History/Background

2.1 Local Link services were initially developed as a way of fulfilling a transport need difficult to fulfil by conventional bus services, such as in the following circumstances:

- Where there is latent low demand such as straggling communities or rural areas;
- Where conventional public transport is uneconomic to provide;
- Where conventional public transport is ineffective in meeting a range of journey aspirations, such as where several destinations need to be served but there is low demand;
- To kickstart public transport demand in developing areas or site.

2.2 The benefits of DRT are the ability to provide a bus service for difficult to reach areas at a lower cost than a general bus for areas of lower demand or areas where a general bus service cannot penetrate due to geographical spread of trips or geography. The buses only run when required which helps to reduce carbon emissions. Services are convenient for customers and are a viable option for when a general bus service is not appropriate.

2.3 The challenges of such services are that by their very nature, there is little evidence of them being commercially viable and the subsidised services incur higher costs per passenger than general buses as they can only carry so many passengers due to the vehicle size and spread of journeys. Services can be most efficient where the majority of passengers are travelling to or from the same place however often the requirement is for areas which do not have good coverage in a wider area, so this is not possible. Services can also be more efficient where there are multiple vehicles in the same area and so can optimise schedules.

3 Local Link – Current Performance/Impact of Covid

3.1 In the financial year before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, April 2019 to March 2020, Local Link services provided 149,587 passenger journeys on 19 vehicles. During the height of the pandemic, passenger capacities on the vehicles were reduced to promote social distancing and minimise the risks to users/drivers and enhanced cleaning routines were implemented by the operators. Demand for the services fell due to reduced travel patterns which was consistent with other modes,

although services with a high proportion of employment journeys to industrial estates experienced a lower reduction in demand.

3.2 As a result, most Local Link services continue to be affected by the patronage reductions seen during the pandemic. Wythenshawe is now at comparable levels to pre-Covid operation but patronage on other services is still significantly lower. Notwithstanding this, all Local Link services are now heavily used for employment purposes with all except the Saddleworth service having 50% or more employment journeys.

3.3 Changes to the local bus network in Rochdale facilitated the removal of the Kingsway service in April 2022, allowing the destination to be served in a more cost-effective way by general bus, having helped to grow demand for public transport access to the site. Initial figures show that trips to and from the businesses on the Kingsway site on the general bus have reached levels similar to those delivered on the Local Link service with a significantly reduced cost. At the same time, the site was removed as a destination on the Middleton and Heywood service and the hours reduced to reflect the change in passenger demand. The Partington day-time service was also removed due to improvements to the local bus network (Monday to Saturday), with the resource moved to provide a second vehicle and increase coverage on the evening service. Table 1 provides a summary the services and total annual patronage.

Table 1: Patronage by Financial Year

Financial year – April to March	Patronage	Number of Vehicles	Comment
2019/2020	149,587	19	
2020/2021	81,322	18	Ramsbottom removed end of March 2020.
2021/2022	89,795	15	Logistics North removed in April 2021. Hindley removed in October 2021
2022/2023 projection if	70,000	11	Kingsway removed/1 vehicle reduced on

patronage does not increase			Middleton/Heywood and Partington daytime service removed in April 2022.
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3.4 Table below shows a sample month's patronage by contract.

Table 2: sample month of patronage, Local Link services

Contract	November 2022 Trips
Uppermill and Saddleworth	333
Partington/Dunham Massey	594
East Manchester/Danebank	786
Middleton/Heywood	1,180
Wythenshawe/Heald Green/Timperley	3,100
Total Trips	5,660

4 Local Link Service Improvement Plan

4.1 As a result of these lower patronage numbers, a Local Link Service Improvement Plan has been developed to help ensure value for money is being delivered.

4.2 Officers have devised a marketing campaign to promote these services to attract new users and increase usage. This activity started in August and September and further activity will continue into January and February. The marketing includes:

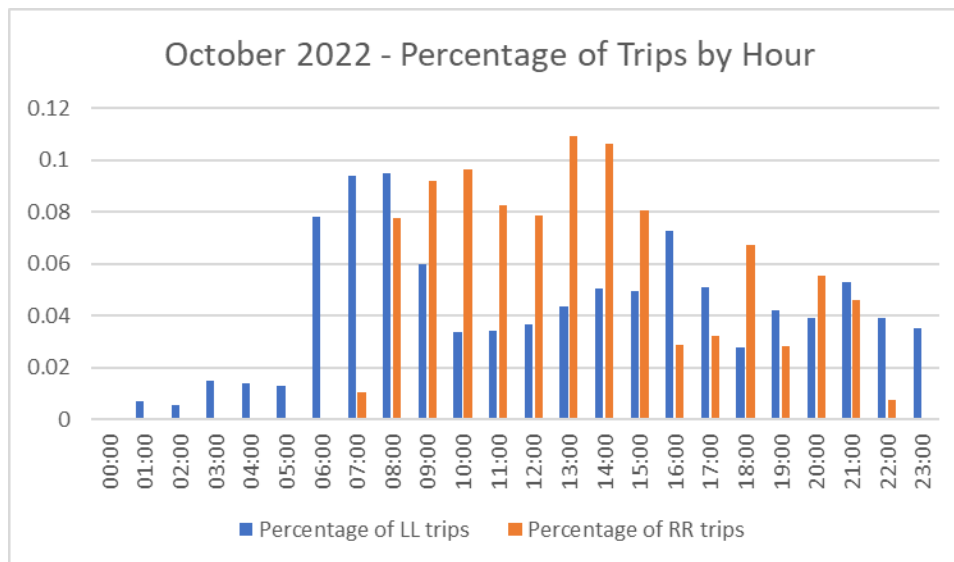
- Distribution of leaflets to Travelshops in relevant areas
- Social media adverts
- Local Link materials developed and issued with Get on Board branding alignment through TfGM's social channels;
- Paid socials targeted in LL areas;
- Rail posters in Local Link areas;
- TfGM MPU homepage link (banner ads);
- Leaflets to be distributed in GPs, local libraries, housing associations (within LL areas);

- A stakeholder toolkit will be issued via email to a list of bespoke stakeholders within each service area. This includes local councillors, local industrial estates where connections are limited, community centres, housing associations, community groups etc;
- Inclusion in the district newsletter;
- Work with Customer team to ensure processes are being followed correctly for new registrations;
- Review of Digital platform to ensure messaging is consistent and understandable;
- Ensuring revenue processes are in place to capture revenue from capped fare reimbursement scheme and smart GMTL products.

- 4.3 Officers will be in touch with councillors in relevant areas to share promotional materials. Repeated marketing of the service is required to sustain trip numbers and deliver value for money. It is important that services are designed which are easy for customers to understand while also not detracting from the general bus network. This is currently a challenge using the existing technology. Subsequent tenders will include a requirement in the technology where Local Link trips are only offered if there is not a bus service within certain time and distance parameters or in the event of a disability reason.
- 4.4 At the same time, TfGM are working on developing a more detailed specification for the Local Link vehicles to ensure they can meet the needs of as many users as possible and provide a consistent experience.
- 4.5 As part of this improvement plan achievable improvement targets have been set for the services, in order to demonstrate positive patronage trends. If patronage does not increase to an acceptable level then alternative options will be considered e.g. withdrawal or more significant reductions e.g. removal of weekends. If services do have to be withdrawn, work will be done to assess whether amendments to bus services can be made to fill some of the gaps and users signposted to Ring and Ride where appropriate.
- 4.6 In addition, officers are also exploring opportunities to better utilise resource across both Local Link and Ring and Ride services as part of the Accessible Transport Review. As previously reported to this committee, TfGM will assume control of the Ring and Ride call centre function in 2023 which will allow a small-scale 'co-mingling' pilot to be tested. This means using the Ring and Ride and Local Link fleets more

flexibly, allowing Local Link services to accept Ring and Ride trips which have been refused due to capacity and vice versa, where passengers are able to travel on the Local Link vehicles. As the peak times of travel vary between Local Link and Ring and Ride this could be a way to increase the number of trips able to be carried across both services, shown below in Figure 1.

Figure 1 - Percentage of trips by hour for Local Link and Ring and Ride services.



4.7 Another area for improvement is the current state of the market for Local Link operators is extremely limited. In 2021/2022 there were three operators providing Local Link services (two taxi companies and one community transport organisation). However, following the withdrawal of services in Bolton and Hindley, there is now only one taxi operator providing the remaining services. In 2022 officers engaged with bus companies to understand the lack of bids from that sector. The feedback was:

- Longer contract terms are more attractive
- Often outpriced by taxi companies as bus companies operate under PSV licencing

4.8 Once the immediate recovery of the services has been reviewed, these will be considered in future tenders, for example, seeking to issue future tenders further in advance of contract start dates.

5 Other Accessible Transport provision

Community Transport

5.1 There is an active community transport sector within Greater Manchester. Most are part of the Community Transport Association and over the last few years attend a

forum which has been led both by TfGM and the CTA in turn. This forum is used to discuss best practice and share ideas and takes place on a quarterly basis.

- 5.2 There are currently six Community Transport operations in Greater Manchester covering Rochdale, Oldham, Stockport, Tameside, Wigan and one GM-wide organisation. As of 2018/2019 they provided in the region of 115,000 trips per annum. These are delivered through a mixture of volunteer driver schemes where volunteers use their own cars to transport people and minibus or wheelchair accessible cars. Four of the organisations have one or more minibuses totalling circa 20 minibuses and wheelchair accessible vehicles. They provide a mixture of individual journeys, group travel trips, SEN and health contracts, and hospital appointments to older people, people with disabilities and sick children.
- 5.3 These organisations are funded from a mixture of grants, local authority contracts, trading, membership fees, CCGs, and fundraising/donations. See annex 2 for an overview of each organisation.
- 5.4 Further joint working will be beneficial to understand how whether the various services could work together to either share vehicle resources or other shared procurement activities, particularly to support Ring & Ride provision.

Health Journeys – NEPTS

- 5.5 Non-emergency patient transport (NEPTS) in Greater Manchester is a service delivered by North West Ambulance Service. They provide non-emergency transport to and from hospital appointments using a mixture of ambulances and other contracting transport providers, based on a set of eligibility criteria. The service covers Lancashire, Greater Manchester, Merseyside and Cumbria and delivers approximately 1.2 million journeys per year.
- 5.6 Officers from TfGM have previously met with representatives from the NHS and NWAS to understand possible synergies, but the Covid-19 pandemic did move priorities away from this area.
- 5.7 While this remains a key element of the overall objectives of the Accessible Transport Review, it will require significant resource to progress in this area, at least in the short term, and given other pressures it is questionable how much of a priority this will be for the health sector at this time. Officers will continue to engage with the health sector with the aim of sharing data to look at this issue more closely to demonstrate the business case by delivering improved efficiency.

6 Accessible Transport Future Objectives and Integration with the Wider Network

- 6.1 The short-term priorities for Local Link in Greater Manchester are to improve patronage and maximise efficiencies within the existing services. Local Link services are not currently included in the franchising model however there is the goal to align Local Link services more closely with the general network.
- 6.2 In order to achieve this Anybus products have been accepted on Local Link services to allow interchanging between Local Link and other modes for some years. In September 2022 fares were brought in line with the capped £2 single bus fares. Local Link services will have 'light touch' Bee Network branding to indicate that Local Link services are part of TfGM's integrated network.
- 6.3 Following the full implementation of bus franchising in 2025, TfGM will have control over the whole bus network. Bus planning principles are being drawn up which will inform how decisions are made about where services are. DRT will form a part of those principles to apply a consistent approach to how and where a Local Link service could or should be introduced.
- 6.4 TfGM is also working on a new Local Bus Strategy document. Local Link and Ring and Ride principles and objectives will be included to ensure that DRT is considered as part of a wider network.
- 6.5 Future procurement activities for the scheduling software will be designed in reference to the new technology for journey planning and ticketing with integration where appropriate.
- 6.6 Pooling DRT vehicle resources across Greater Manchester will delivery greater value for money and a better customer offer. The first step is merging the contact centres and running the co-mingling pilot with the Local Link and Ring and Ride services.
- 6.7 Further work needs to be undertaken to understand what the possibilities are around integrating further with health and SEN school's journeys to provide a 'total transport' approach.
- 6.8 Currently SEN transport is procured and managed at Local Authority level. The Review was presented at the Children and Young People's Steering Group in January 2022. Local authority leads have proposed a pilot scheme to be developed with interested authorities. TfGM will support this review with technical advice and support when required.

6 Next Steps

- Marketing campaign for Local Link services with to reach lower costs per passenger;
- Merge the LL and RR contact centres;
- Review Local Link performance in June/July - a further report on any decisions will be brought to this committee;
- Issue scheduling specification permitting integration with other TfGM applications and integrating DRT with a journey planner, so trips are only offered where there is no other alternative;
- Develop a pilot scheme to use the RR and LL fleets more flexibly – co-mingling;
- Include DRT in the Local Bus Strategy – publication Summer 2023;
- Continue engagement with the Community Transport Sector and lead GM forums;
- Ensure DRT is included in the Bus Planning Principles Guidance;
- Develop the operator market by changes to tendering process.

Appendix 1

Details of Local Link Services

Service Name	Hours of Operation	Contract	Peak Time Vehicles	Key Destinations
Wythenshawe	24/7 Monday to Sunday			Manchester Enterprise Zone areas:
Timperley				
Heald Green	9am to 5pm Monday to Friday (24/7 for trips between Heald Green and Manchester Enterprise Zone)	Wythenshawe/Heald Green/Timperley (0014)	3 vehicles	Manchester Airport, World Freight Centre, Wythenshawe Hospital and Atlas Business Park
East Manchester	6:30pm to 10pm Monday to Sunday	East Manchester/Dane Bank (6012)	2 vehicles	North Manchester General Hospital/MRI/St Marys/Eye Hospital
Dane Bank Evening	6:30pm to 10pm Monday to Sunday			Crown point Shopping Park/Morrisons (Denton Town Centre)
Heywood	5:50am to 10:30pm Monday to Friday and 9am to 5pm Saturday and Sunday	Heywood/Middleton (6085)	3 vehicles	Heywood, Pilsworth Industrial Estate, Heywood Distribution Centre

Middleton	5:30am to 10:30pm Monday to Sunday			Middleton, Birch Services, Heywood Distribution Park, North Manchester General Hospital
Partington				Partington, Dunham Massey, Altrincham, Sale, Trafford Centre, Trafford Park, Urmston, Warburton. Key locations include Trafford General Hospital, Trafford Centre, Trafford Park and Altrincham Interchange
Dunham Massey	5am to 8:30am and 6:30pm to midnight Monday to Saturday and 5am to 11pm Sunday	Partington/Dunham Massey (6070)	2 vehicles	
Saddleworth and Mossley	7am to 6pm Monday to Friday, and 8am to 6pm Saturday and Sunday	Saddleworth and Mossley (6069)	1 vehicle	Denshaw, Delph, Diggle, Dobcross, Uppermill, Greenfield, Scouthead, Mossley

Appendix 2

Overview of Community Transport Organisation Services

Name of Organisation	Description of Activities	Number of Journeys in 2018/2019
Driven CIO (Wigan)	Accessible minibus and volunteer driver scheme. Aimed at vulnerable and isolated people, community groups and care homes. Mixture of individual journeys, group transport and a home to school contract.	Approx 7,500
Easy Go Community Transport (Stockport)	Minibus based. For Stockport residents who cannot use or have great difficulty in using public transport. Group travel, SEN and NHS contracts.	40,000
HMR Circle Volunteer Drivers Scheme (Rochdale, Heywood, Middleton and the Pennine Villages)	Volunteer driver scheme for older people (50+) and vulnerable adults who cannot or struggle to use public transport. One accessible minibus. Focus on social isolation and linked to a social circle linking transport with social events to combat social isolation.	Approx 17,500
Transport for Sick Children (GM)	Volunteer driver scheme which takes sick children to hospital and clinic appointments. Covers all of Greater Manchester.	Approx 5,800
Stockport Car Scheme	Volunteer driver scheme for anyone over the age of 18 who would struggle to use public transport and pay their council tax to Stockport.	Approx 40,000

Miles of Smiles (Action Together - Tameside)	Volunteer driver service for anyone who lives in Tameside and has a health condition, who does not have their own transport and, due to illness, age or disability is unable to use public transport to get about. Mixed social/health/leisure trips.	Approx 6,500
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