

Member Briefing

Number: 3026

Title: Provision of Dial-a-Ride services (Community Transport)

Summary: This briefing is an update to Member Briefing number: 3012 providing details about a new Dial-a Ride service called Your Bus starting from Wednesday, 1 April 2026

Background

The Council currently contracts the provision of 'Dial a Ride' services from two operators, Ealing Community Transport (ECT) covering the Chester and Ellesmere Port area and Changing Lives Together (CLT) covering the Winsford and Northwich area. This contract expires on the Tuesday, 31 March 2026. The contract was issued in 2015 and has been extended multiple times to maintain service provision for users. Dial a Ride provides door-to-door transport for users who have a mobility issue which prevents them from using public transport or those who live rurally and have no access to public transport. As the Dial a Ride contract was extended, additional statutory transport services for Adult Social Care and Children and Families were added to the core 'Dial a Ride' component provided by both operators.

Dial a Ride is not a statutory responsibility of the Council. It is no longer possible to extend the current Dial a Ride contract in its current form. The decision was made to separate the statutory and non-statutory service tasks within the contract to ensure the statutory elements of the provision required by Children's Services and Adult Social Care were commissioned independently from the non-statutory Dial a Ride element. The statutory services will be commissioned and running separately from Wednesday, 1 April 2026, using the standard tendering framework to achieve value for money, to ensure that all those eligible for transport continue to receive this. These services will not be provided by ECT and CLT; alternative operators have been selected for these statutory transport services.

For the remaining "Dial-a-Ride" elements of the contract, an open tender was issued to the market in 2025 to which only two responses were received – from the two incumbent operators. Both responses were deemed non-compliant as they both significantly exceeded the Council's fixed budget threshold. To ensure continuation of service provision for eligible users, council officers maintained open dialogue and negotiations with the incumbent operators.

What is happening

Following initial discussion, ECT, who operate services under the "PlusBus" brand (including Dial a Ride) in Chester and Ellesmere Port, notified the council of their intention to step away from negotiations. CLT continued discussions and these have resulted in a operational scope for a Dial a Ride service being received from CLT for the whole Borough, that is within the financial parameters of the Council's budget for this service.

Under Section 43 of the Procurement Act 2023, the contract for Dial a Ride service is to be directly awarded to Changing Lives Together. A Transparency Notice has been issued on Monday, 2 March 2026, following this a Contract Award Notice can be issued. The issue of the Contract Award Notice starts a legal standstill period of eight (8) working days. After this period expires, the contract with Changing Lives Together will be formally executed (signed).

The new community transport service operated by CLT will be an extension of their existing “Your Bus” service. A fleet of eight new vehicles will be procured to provide a Dial a Ride service across the borough.

- The eligibility criteria will widen, meaning the service will be available to any user without access to public transport;
- All users will need to register. This can be done at any time, up to and including when they board the vehicle;
- Multi-channel booking will be available, with users able to phone, WhatsApp or use Social Media to book;
- The service will operate, as a minimum, from 10am to 3pm Monday to Friday with the option for extension in the event of sufficient demand;
- Fares will be offered in two forms “standard” and “front door”:
 - Standard – A user will be collected from an agreed location with a group of other users i.e. a local supermarket, doctors or leisure centre and taken to their destination; and
 - Front Door – A user will be collected and returned directly to a specified location
- There will be an increase in fares:

	One-Way	Return
Existing	£3 - £3.50	£6 - £7.50
New - Standard	£4	£7.50
New – Front Door	£5	£9

- CLT will offer community hire of the vehicles outside of the minimum operating hours, mirroring the previous offer provided by ECT through their ‘PlusBus’ branded service and continuing a service offered by CLT previously in Winsford and Northwich.

A dedicated communications plan has been developed to notify users of the changes to the service. Following issue of this Members Briefing, a printed leaflet will be distributed by the incumbent operators (ECT and CLT) on the buses, as well as distributed to a range of community facilities across the Borough.

Cheshire West Voluntary Action has joined discussion with officers to determine the most appropriate way to engage with community groups. Discussions are ongoing to organise briefing sessions for key groups in the borough. All users who currently use ECT’s ‘PlusBus’ service or transport provided by CLT for any statutory services through Children’s Services or Adult Social Care have been secured alternative transport provision and each user will be individually notified by the Council’s Transport team prior to the end of the existing contract.

When it is happening

Following a legal standstill period, the contract with Changing Lives Together will be formally executed and the following will take place:

- The existing Dial-a-Ride contract will end on Tuesday, 31 March 2026
- The expanded 'Your Bus' service will start Wednesday, 1 April 2026
- Any affected users with statutory transport commissioned through Children's Services and Adult Social Care will be notified of their new transport and offered an opportunity to meet their new transport team;
- An information video to guide 'Your Bus' Dial a Ride users will be issued to Council social media channels by Monday, 16 March 2026;
- Leaflets on the 'Your Bus' Dial a Ride will be distributed to a range of community settings, to be available by Wednesday, 18 March 2026;
- A News Direct will be issued on Tuesday, 3 March to all Council staff informing them of the change, and signposting queries from users to the operator; and
- If feasible, community group briefing sessions will be delivered between Monday, 9 and Wednesday, 18 March to ensure service leaders have visibility of the new proposals.

For further information, contact: Chris Hardwick, Head of Strategic Transport and Infrastructure

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Responsible Committee, Cabinet Member: Councillor Karen Shore, Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Transport and Highways (including Waste)

Date: Monday, 2 March 2026