**Cheshire West and Chester Council - Rural Mobility Fund (RMF) pre-booked public transport service**

**Soft market test for operators**

**Introduction**

This is a soft market test exercise.

Cheshire West and Chester Council (CW&C) are keen to understand the market position for the public transport service outlined below and for help to inform design of the service contract specification.

Potential bidders are invited to provide responses to the questions set out below and provide any further information that may help the supplier market and CW&C to jointly obtain best value from the available funding.

CW&C may contact you on a company by company basis to discuss themes further online. These discussions will be held on Microsoft Teams during **week commencing 23RD AUGUST 2021** Please state within your response if you would prefer not to do this.

Please note that responses will be used by CW&C to enable development of the specification. Bidders responses will not be shared with other bidders.

**Responding to this soft market test exercise**

Please provide your responses below each of the questions set out in this form. You do not need to respond to each question if you prefer not to.

**PLEASE RETURN YOUR SUBMISSION TO** **Debbie.pitcher@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk** **NO LATER THAN BY THE END OF THURSDAY 12TH AUGUST 2021.** You may attach any relevant additional information to your submission.

Please be advised that participating in this soft market test exercise does not facilitate any involvement in the future tender process and bidders would still need to apply via The Chest as normal.

**1. Rural Mobility Fund trial:**

CW&C was successful in securing funding from the Department for Transport (DfT) Rural Mobility Fund (RMF) to trial a pre-booked flexible public transport service in the Frodsham, Helsby and surrounding rural area.

The area south of Frodsham and Helsby is rural with a low density, dispersed population (average 211 persons/km2) and high car ownership (only 11% of households have no car whilst 51% have two or more).

The council will be seeking a proactive operator for this service, having responsibility for community and stakeholder engagement to ensure the service will generate strong demand in addition to having an approach that is responsive to changing travel requirements. In other words, a Delivery Operator **(DeOp)**

**2. CW&C Background Strategic Context:**

**Sustainable Travel Taskforce (STT)**

This taskforce has been established to consider the opportunities and barriers to delivering ambitious inclusive walking, cycling, public transport and integrated transport projects and what can be done to secure positive outcomes. This is within the context of the council’s declaration of a Climate Emergency and a target for the borough to be carbon neutral by 2045. This also aligns to the Department for Transport’s “Decarbonising Transport A Better, Greener Britain” plan which sets out how the government will deliver emission reductions and the associated benefits that will be realised from it across the UK. (<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1002285/decarbonising-transport-a-better-greener-britain.pdf>)

Work of the taskforce considers the potential for sustainable transport projects to make a positive contribution to; public health, tackling the climate emergency, improving air quality, improving accessibility, delivering high quality, vibrant and liveable communities, reducing congestion, achieving value for money, helping economic recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, tackling transport poverty and inequality of access.

In December 2020, four pilot studies were launched to investigate more closely the possibilities that may exist to further the aims of the STT. Pilot 4 is based upon Ellesmere Port, Helsby & Frodsham, aligning with the CW&C Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP), North Cheshire Community Rail Partnership (NCCRP) and the RMF pre-booked public transport initiative.

**3. Bus Service Review Taskforce**

This is a cross-party group comprising 11 CW&C ward councillors reviewing the following key topics:

* local bus services
* community transport and rural mobility
* home to school transport
* Park & Ride in Chester

The Task Group has carefully assessed evidence in agreeing the draft priorities presented to Places Overview and Scrutiny Committee (25 January 2021), identifying a set of 35 potential interventions. Further work is now being undertaken to review these options in context of synergies between draft findings of the Bus Service Review Taskforce and the National Bus Strategy. Key themes of integration, affordability, preparing for economic bounce back and improved ticketing and marketing across the transport sector were also identified.

**4. Current Conventional Services in the area:**

* Bus service 48: Frodsham – Northwich - five journeys per day in each direction, Monday to Friday only.
* Bus service X30: Chester to Warrington Hourly service Monday to Saturday (last to Warrington 16:38 and from Warrington 17:15) Evenings between Chester and Frodsham (ex Chester 20:15 and 22:15 ex Frodsham 20:43 and 22:43). Sunday 6 journeys Chester to Frodsham.
* Bus service 2: Chester to Runcorn via Ellesmere Port and Elton hourly service Monday to Saturday finishes 17:15

These services provide good east-west A56 inter-urban bus services along the northern border, providing links to Chester, Runcorn and Warrington for employment, further education, major retail and three General Hospitals. However, the bus feed into this corridor is extremely limited and there are no marketed interchanges with the effect that residents with cars simply drive directly to their destination outside the area.

There is no single corridor direction for journeys. Everyday shopping is possible in Helsby and Frodsham but for other purposes Frodsham and its surroundings look to Runcorn; Helsby and Mouldsworth to Chester; Acton Bridge to Northwich whilst other settlements have no clear preference.

Rail Services comprise:

6 stations -

Ince & Elton Limited service between Ellesmere Port and Helsby / Warrington

Helsby, Frodsham Manchester, Liverpool via Halton Curve and Chester / north Wales

Acton Bridge Liverpool, Crewe and Birmingham

Delamere, Mouldsworth Chester, Stockport and Manchester

Bus-rail interchange is low - two key station car parks normally overflow into neighbourhood streets on week days (pre-pandemic).

**5. About the Rural Mobility Fund Proposed Service**

**QUESTION 1 – The service**

The RMF service seeks to improve understanding of whether demand responsive transport can fill a gap within a fixed route bus service network to better meets the needs of residents in rural and/or suburban areas. It will also help to understand the specific barriers unique to demand responsive transport and to identify potential solutions that may establish it as a viable and sustainable alternative.

An initial public engagement and consultation exercise is underway which is expected to provide a basis for the overall service provision pattern of the invitation to tender (ITT). However, it is proposed that the DeOp (Delivery Operator) will be required to demonstrate relevant expertise to lead on a second (and subsequent) and more focused consultation and engagement exercise to shape service provision. The DeOp will also have a major role in updating the service within available budget, through effective consultation and engagement with potential and actual service users as well as with CW&C.

The RMF service will provide completely new journey opportunities for a large part of the population with many areas having little or no bus service. As there is relatively little historic journey pattern information, initial demand forecasts and some provisional aspects of scheme design have been developed through a combination of detailed simulation of different scenarios using software from a market leading platform provider and examination of population demographics and current journey times.

Although the RMF business case anticipated a standard operation of weekdays between 06:30 and 20:00, with slightly reduced hours on Saturdays and Sundays and potentially an option for later evening provision, it is possible that the public engagement exercise will identify patterns different to this. For example, a peak for commuting between Tuesdays and Thursdays, provision for evening leisure activities or summer seasonal weekend peaks.

The CW&C trial concept is based upon establishing specific notional pre-booked services with the intention of maximising the number of passengers and revenue per vehicle working hour (subject to any social distancing requirements). Rather than purely being a ‘many to many’ demand responsive service, this service will be based upon consolidating peoples’ travel needs into specific vehicle journeys. For example, to arrive in Frodsham on Tuesday, Thursday and Friday between 10:00 and 10:15 or between 11:30 and 11:45, with return journeys at 10:15, 11:45 or 12:30. The route is flexible within the catchment area, with passengers booking their journey in advance. A technology platform (app or similar) will be used for passenger journey bookings and other functions.

**What are your thoughts on the above approach for how this service will operate and requirements of the DeOp?**

**QUESTION 2**

CW&C is seeking to develop an invitation to tender (ITT) that achieves best value, requires flexibility of when the service will operate throughout the contract duration, yet provides a proportionate and sensible basis for cost recovery for the operator.

The remit is likely to feature co-ordination of work provided by other operators such as taxis or community transport to ensure that the most cost-effective use is made of available capacity in the area, including non-public services currently supported by CW&C.

The ITT may specify the maximum budget available and is anticipated to allow for the equivalent of two additional part-time vehicles to one full time vehicle.

A three year agreement (with potential for extension) based upon the standard CW&C local service conditions of contract is anticipated.

**This clearly requires a different approach to a conventional public transport service contract. Please provide comment on features of the ITT that would balance between flexibility, providing a basis to ensure your costs (fixed and variable) will be met as well as features or financing arrangements that would incentivise your performance.**

**Please comment on the potential for “the prime contractor” to co-ordinate work on a pre-determined basis with other non-public operators in order to improve overall use of available capacity.**

**QUESTION 3 – Technology platform**

CW&C will procure the technology platform separate to procurement of the DeOp. This will give flexibility for CW&C to potentially expand use of this ICT beyond this specific contract with a DeOp.

The scheduling algorithm on the DRT platform will guard against abstraction from existing scheduled bus services.

The platform will produce driver manifests and include statutory / agreed rest periods / comfort breaks at identified toilets with a Driver App replicating necessary information including specific needs of passengers.

The platform will incorporate a Passenger App to allow for bookings, messages and real-time tracking. However, CW&C will also need to ensure that a call centre facility is provided, capable of handling conventional telephone and text-based bookings, as well as message-handling and communication of incidents and emergency cover arrangements.

**If your organisation already uses similar technology, please describe any interface requirements that need to be considered by CW&C (for example with electronic ticket machines). – likewise, about contact with the call centre**

**QUESTION 4** - **Community transport integration**

A vision is to co-ordinate and integrate the RMF and community transport services to provide “transport for communities”. The aim is for these services to be available to all people as opposed to those meeting eligibility criteria. The full additional needs of mobility impaired people need to be met which may include aiding boarding and alighting the vehicle and help applying seat restraints.

Passengers with more complex needs are anticipated to continue to be served by the specialist community transport operator. We are considering channelling all bookings through the software platform with allocation to community transport reflecting co-ordinated use of vehicles with the main RMF service as well as for passenger’s support needs. Note that ‘community transport’ may include the CW&C internal fleet as well as specialist third-sector operators.

**Please provide your comments on the practical deliverability of this concept.**

**QUESTION 5 - Vehicles**

All vehicles operating these services must fully comply with the prevailing relevant legislation and requirements for accessibility.

Use of bikes is increasingly part of peoples’ end to end journey solution as well as being a mode of travel for leisure and recreational purposes. The area of this pre-booked service includes many opportunities for cycling including venues (and holiday destination) such as Delamere Forest in addition to interchange with rail services where passengers can be accompanied by bikes. It is hoped that one or more vehicles on the pre-booked service will have bike carrying capability, providing opportunities to increase patronage and revenue whilst also encouraging active lifestyles and diversifying the demand market.

Options for secure carriage of bikes could include an internal rack accommodating two bikes; removable seating in a section of the vehicle to enable additional bike rack(s) for specific pre-booked trips; external rear mounted bike rack or a special trailer to carry a greater number of bikes (e.g.10) to be used for specific pre-booked trips. Clearly, any provision needs to comply with relevant legislation.

A vehicle such as an ADL E200 (approximately up to 27 seats) offers greater seating capacity, space for social distancing, greater configuration flexibility, luggage accommodation, “resembles a mainstream bus” and potentially has strong suitability for work after the RMF contract which could positively impact on its residual value.

A vehicle such as a Mellor Strata (up to 22 seats) offers space for social distancing, potential flexible configuration of the low floor area including for luggage, potentially has suitability for work after the RMF contract which could positively impact on its residual value, is more manoeuvrable than a larger vehicle and potentially has lower fuel consumption than a larger vehicle.

A vehicle such as an EVM Mercedes Sprinter conversion (up to 16 seats) has potential flexible configuration of the low floor area including for luggage, potentially has suitability for work after the RMF contract which could positively impact on its residual value, is more manoeuvrable than a larger vehicle, potentially has lower fuel consumption than a larger vehicle and may be of sufficient capacity for this service.

**What would you overall consider to be the most appropriate of the above three categories of vehicle to be the main vehicle dedicated to operating the RMF service or please provide an example of what vehicle would you propose and why? Please give specific reasons for your response.**

**Please provide comments on each of the options described for the carriage of bikes and of any further suggestions.**

**QUESTION 6 – Further comments**

**Please provide any further comments that you consider will help CW&C to compile an ITT for this service that will be attractive to bidders, provide a service that will generate patronage and deliver value for money.**

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR INTEREST AND TIME TAKEN TO COMPLETE THIS SUBMISSION**