

Cheshire's PlusBus

Launched in October 2007, PlusBus is a door-to-door minibus service for those who have mobility difficulties and cannot use public transport. It is run by ECT Group (Ealing Community Transport) in partnership with Cheshire County Council, Chester City Council and Ellesmere Port & Neston Borough Council. In its first week, over 800 passenger trips were completed using just four minibuses.

The fleet of brand new, fully accessible UV Treka minibuses in the distinctive green 'PlusBus' colour scheme has been funded by Cheshire County Council in partnership with Chester City Council and Ellesmere Port and Neston Borough Council. The service operates seven days a week except Bank Holidays. At the launch, County Councillor and Acting Executive Member for Highways and Transportation David Freear said: 'The new vehicles, with added features, should also make journeys much more enjoyable and stress-free. I am pleased to see new members registering with the service as well as those who made use of the previous dial-a-ride service.'

Ben Saunders, ECT's General Manager, is quite clear why the introduction of Cheshire's new PlusBus service has gone so smoothly: 'It's all down to the pre-launch planning and preparation; and since we launched, the drivers have been the key.'

In June 2007, four months before this replacement dial-a-ride service commenced, about 800 contact letters were sent out by Cheshire CC using the existing list of service users. They were asked to sign up afresh to be members of the new PlusBus door-to-door service. In July



PlusBus collecting shoppers outside Ellesmere Port's Asda supermarket.

and August, as the application forms came back in, the PlusBus team was augmented temporarily by some student labour plus veterans from ECT's re-launch of Milton Keynes' door-to-door transport (see B&CB issue 925, 6 July 2007). Patiently, they rang each passenger up to discuss their regular journeys with them. In August and September, the regular journeys were input into



There is room for expansion at PlusBus' Ellesmere Port depot.

the Trapeze Novus internet-based scheduling system, and a further iteration of call-backs to passengers was made to fine tune the pick-up times in order to maximise patronage.

So when the service went live at the start of October 2007, the four buses operating the weekday services were immediately running close to capacity. With all the regular bookings already in the system, the scheduling and dispatch function could be focused on cancellations and casual one-off bookings. At this point, the drivers, with their extensive local knowledge, were able to provide feedback into the planning and scheduling. Route tests were undertaken to check the timings of the computer generated schedules and further refinements were made.

Four months in, the January 2008 totals were as follows: 2,658 single passenger journeys completed;

3,725 booked. The relatively high level of cancellations

in January was partly seasonal, and partly due to a local outbreak of the same nasty virus that many have experienced this winter all over the country. Nonetheless, pro rata, these figures equate to 32,000 passenger journeys per year, but with the potential for at least 45,000 to be carried on the system. This represents a significant increase in patronage. Membership now stands

at just over 1,000.

For Ben Saunders, moving from London up to Chester has been a return to his roots. After several years working for ECT in the south east, he was hoping to move back up north with his young family. Born in Lancaster, he has family members living in Chester. When ECT won the PlusBus tender, Ben seized the opportunity to relocate. 'At

the risk of stereotyping people,' he says, 'I have found the atmosphere up here very friendly. Cheshire County Council have been open and honest in their dealings with us. Ellesmere Port and Neston Council are showing considerable interest in the service, with a proper partnership approach.'

Out on the road with Alan Masser, one of



The PlusBus team (L to R): Ben Saunders (General Manager), drivers John Monkman, Alan Masser, Fred Burt, Alan Jones, and Ernie Plavell, and Ian Dibbert (Operations Controller).

PlusBus' five full-time drivers, it was time to find out how PlusBus is working in practice. Alan has plenty of experience. He spent seven years at Chester Bus on the previous dial-a-ride service, before moving over to ECT in October under TUPE. The UV Treka is much appreciated. The Mercedes Sprinter base, with its 2,148 cc diesel engine and semi-automatic gearbox, runs very smoothly, and speed limiters are fitted. The Treka we rode in has already done 10,000 miles in its first four months, further emphasising the high intensity of the operation. It is not uncommon for some dial-a-ride or day care vehicles to do less than 10,000 miles a year.

But there is a downside to the Treka's wider and longer body. When the commuters' cars come back in the evening and park up on both sides of the road, getting through can be very difficult. In fact, local traffic conditions are also blighted by some very poor quality speed bump installations. 'On our old vehicles, we used to have to replace the interior light bulbs regularly, as they could not take the shocks from the bumps,' Alan recalls.

Alan handed out the publicity leaflet and

Buses for All - operator

member's handbook, from the stock that is kept on board each vehicle, which clearly lay out how the service works, operating times, and deals with frequently asked questions in a very readable



These passengers are very pleased with the new PlusBus service and its regular bookings system.

format.

At 11:00 on a Thursday, I was on board for about 45 minutes. In that time, five passenger journeys were completed, with two shoppers collected outside Asda, two outside Morrisons, and one passenger collected from home and dropped off at the Salvation Army community centre, and the others taken back home with their weekly shop. Alan assisted all the passengers, when asked, with shopping, trolleys, walking aids and so on, seeing them to the door if necessary. Throughout, Alan managed to maintain a relaxed atmosphere, whilst sticking to what was a tight, but not impossible, schedule.



Shopping trolleys, walking aids and other items brought on board have to be tied down securely with straps and belts at the rear of the bus to prevent injury to passengers.

'The new booking system is much better,' one passenger enthused. 'If they can't give you the time you ask for, they offer you other times so you get a ride if you can be flexible. On the old service, if the first time you asked for was not available, that was the end of the call.' All five passengers, all of whom were over 80 years old, were very pleased indeed with PlusBus.

Returning to the PlusBus depot in an industrial unit just north of Ellesmere Port centre, Ben Saunders was busy taking passengers' calls. He was doing his stint, as Ian

Dibbert, the Operations Controller, was on holiday. He also has some part-time administration back up, and five full-time and three casual drivers (providing 202 driver hours a week between them). Behind all this, is the ECT Group, which provides back office and financial functions from their London HQ in Ealing.

Another form of back up comes from Milton Keynes Community Transport,

the joint venture between ECT and Age Concern Milton Keynes. Their PlusBus service also uses Trapeze. Although the two services are operated completely separately, they can each log on to the other's service schedules, and as a result Milton Keynes provides out of hours cover for Cheshire's PlusBus. Regarding Trapeze, Ben was able to demonstrate how slick and fast it is, with most calls lasting under a minute. Each vehicle is tracked and the results are available on-line in real-time. However, the mapping within Trapeze is not currently linked into the tracking system, and Ben looks forward to the time when that will be possible.

Ben Saunders is generally pleased with the five Trekas so far. Four are used 09:00 - 17:00 weekdays, two in the evenings until 23:00 hours. On Saturday, there is one bus in the day and the evening; on Sunday, there is one bus during the day. One bus is there as a spare, vital given the intensity of the weekday operation. To date, the only glitch has been when one of the large front windscreens had to be replaced, which was not only a difficult task technically, but was delayed whilst the replacement screen was sourced.

Driver training is a major component of service quality assurance. No driver is allowed out until they have completed MiDAS. There is a continual training programme, including manual handling, first aid and so on. The MiDAS training is now being provided by a neighbouring community transport social enterprise, Halton

Community Transport, who it is expected will soon be providing PlusBus' passenger lift servicing and maintenance.



The PlusBus scheduling system allows up to 7 minutes for a wheelchair user to board and be secured, slightly less for a passenger using the front entrance.

As to what happens next, it is clear that once the dust has settled on the new PlusBus service, Ben Saunders and his team are prepared for expansion. There is room at the depot and within the system that has been established. It will be surprising if they do not get the opportunity to grow.

On 26 February 2008, Cheshire County Council is hosting a meeting at Crewe Alexandra Football Club for everyone concerned with community transport in the county. Gerard Rhodes, the County's Principal Transport Officer, has recently received formal approval for the new Community Transport Strategy for Cheshire. 'We welcome and encourage the involvement of ECT as an additional provider in Cheshire. The new Community Transport Strategy emphasises the

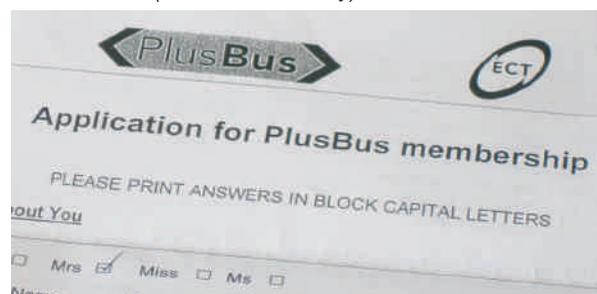
Cheshire-wide opportunities for improving dial-a-ride and other services.'

By Richard Armitage

Richard is an independent transport consultant, whose company provides advice and technical support to Cheshire County Council. For more about the county's community transport strategy, visit <http://www.ratransport.co.uk/news.html> (see the 21.01.08 entry).



Alan Masser taking the shopping right to the front door.



Membership now stands at 1,000 and continues to rise.