

Milton Keynes Community Transport

Milton Keynes Community Transport (MKCT) was one year old on 22 June 2007. Starting from scratch, it has delivered a brand new door-to-door service for eligible older or disabled residents, transforming the Milton Keynes Accessible Transport service in the process.

MKCT celebrated its first anniversary of providing transport services to older, disabled and vulnerable clients within the Milton Keynes area by holding an Open Afternoon at its Kiln Farm offices and depot. Toby Parsons, MKCT's General Manager, welcomed partner organisations, statutory bodies, and other groups interested in MKCT's services. There were two short presentations and demonstrations of MKCT's scheduling system and vehicles.

Toby explained, 'MKCT is a not-for-profit company, a partnership between Age Concern Milton Keynes and Ealing Community Transport Group (ECT), with three representatives from each serving on the MKCT Board. We offer four types of service, PlusBus, lunch clubs, group travel and accessible day trips.'

The money to pay for the whole of the provision comes, and always has come, out of



The Trapeze PASS scheduling system in the MK PlusBus office on a Monday afternoon; in the morning, every single phone and screen was staffed.

revenue generated through car parking charges, which should ensure that it is sustainable.

There are three accessible minibuses out every weekday providing transport for Age Concern's luncheon clubs. Despite providing 450 return journeys per week, there is still a long waiting list for transport and for the lunch clubs themselves. A familiar face is part of the package, with regular drivers deployed on each route.

Then there are two services still in their infancy,



The bright green and yellow livery used for MK PlusBus vehicles is evidence of Ealing Community Transport's involvement. ECT Group's partner is Age Concern Milton Keynes.

one providing a traditional community transport service for voluntary and community organisations requiring group travel, and the other offering accessible day trips to a range of popular destinations.

But MKCT's biggest service is MK PlusBus, the new door-to-door service.

PlusBus has replaced a previous hotchpotch of under-performing services, so it is important to know how this new service came into being.

2005: community transport review

In 1980, an independent charity was established to deliver community transport in Milton Keynes. It was one of the earliest examples of urban CT in the UK. It operated a wheelchair accessible door-to-door service, called Fastchair, using an early Gowrings Mobility Mini Estate conversion. It had a group travel service for voluntary and

community organisations using its own minibus operated under a Section 19 Permit and also had a minibus sharing or brokerage scheme. This service went through several transformations and changes, but eventually it closed down.

By 1999, Milton Keynes Council had contracted with MK Metro (then owned and managed by Julian Peddle, now part of Arriva The Shires), to provide the Milton Keynes Community Transport Service. By 2005-06, the contract was worth

about £775,000 per annum. The service was operated as MK Special (bigger vehicles) and Fastchair (Renault Traffics).

In September 2004, the Commission for Social Care Inspection (formerly known as Social Services Inspectorate) completed its Inspection of Social Care Services for Disabled People in Milton Keynes. This covered all aspects of service provision, not just transport. Generally, the Council was given a good rating, but the CSCI report contained some strongly-worded remarks about the borough's existing transport arrangements for disabled people. The inspectors wrote, 'The availability of accessible transport was the subject of heavy criticism by service users and staff we spoke to. Managers acknowledged that this was a significant problem and needed to be re-evaluated.'

MK Metro's contract was due to end in June 2006, so in June 2005

the Council responded to CSCI by commissioning a review. Consultants Richard Armitage Transport Consultancy Ltd. and TAS Partnership Ltd. produced their findings in September, and at the



MK PlusBus shares the same set of buildings as Age Concern Milton Keynes busy furniture recycling store.

November 2005 Council Cabinet, their proposals were accepted. Just seven months later MK PlusBus commenced operations, the morning after MK Metro bowed out.

The consultants had concluded there was significant unmet demand for door-to-door transport, and that more trips could be achieved

operator

using the same budget. Service users needed to be offered more choice, with a wider range of services being made available.

There had been extensive consultation with passengers and with residents not getting a service. There was a busy user consultation



The MK PlusBus garage.

seminar, held in July 2005 at the National Hockey Stadium, and a postal survey of MK Special, Fastchair, and bus pass users. A series of problems was highlighted, ranging from difficulties getting through on the booking line to lack of information about what transport was available.

The replacement services were designed around three key principles:

- The lowest cost trips should be made as attractive as possible
- The range of options for people needing assisted travel should be widened
- There needed to be incentives to encourage providers to offer better transport services.

The new Milton Keynes Accessible Transport service (MKAT) was put out to competitive tender through the Official Journal of the European Union. The tenders sought a new door-to-door



At the Open Afternoon, visitors were given a wheelchair passenger safety demonstration by MK PlusBus staff.

service for individual passengers, a new group travel service, and a new bookings system, for a total of about £650,000 per annum. The door-to-door provider was expected to start the five-year contract (which has an option for an extension, subject to performance checks) with brand new vehicles. The tenders were won by MKCT.

Even before the changes to the previous service were introduced, by Christmas 2005, the Council introduced some immediate improvements. This

included allowing passengers to use their concessionary bus pass (provided they were eligible) as well as Community Transport. An additional phone line was installed, so that users could easily call in to cancel an unwanted booking. Passengers were able to reserve specific journey slots for up to 13

weeks at a time.

As well as MK PlusBus, the redesigned door-to-door service, a package of other measures, is being introduced. Membership of the service has been made more straightforward and streamlined, the

booking system has been significantly improved, and an Accessible Transport Manager, Mohamed Bandali, has been appointed by the Council to make sure the new service works properly and continues to improve. On 1st May 2007, a brand new concessionary taxi service has commenced, called MK Taxicard, providing users with a new kerb-to-kerb transport service. The next step will be to put together Milton Keynes Accessible Transport Strategy to ensure improvements continue to be made.

MK PlusBus

MK PlusBus is operated using a new fleet of UV Modular Treka 16 Mercedes Sprinters, with each vehicle equipped with a rear-loading passenger lift. They are in the ECT Group bright green and yellow livery, so there is no question that the service is now very visible across Milton Keynes.

The booking and scheduling system is supplied by Trapeze, which recently bought Grampian Software Holdings Limited, whose software is used for driver allocation for more than 30,000 buses every day. MKCT is using an internet-based version of the Trapeze PASS scheduling system, their most up-to-date community transport application.

All drivers, even if they came over from the MK Metro service under TUPE regulations, are Criminal Records Bureau checked and receive a two-day MiDAS training course.

They are in uniform and must carry a photo ID badge. The roster is managed by having full-time, part-time and casual drivers on the books.

So far, the results have been most impressive. The previous system was delivering less than 60,000 single passenger journeys per year. Just one year on, MK PlusBus is able to schedule 100,000 single passenger journeys per year. After cancellations are taken into account, this currently translates into about 75,000 passengers carried. Toby Parsons is clear that he expects to continue

improving on this figure, especially as passengers learn the benefits of being a little more flexible about their travel times. All of this has been achieved with a smaller fleet and less budget than under the previous contract. The remainder of the budget, about £140,000, is being set aside for MK Taxicard, which is expected to support a further 30,000 single passenger journeys per year.

Anna Whitty, ECT's Passenger Transport Operations Director, is delighted to see the progress that has been made in such a short time. She puts this down to what she describes as a 'genuine partnership' between the Council, Age Concern Milton Keynes, ECT, the staff, the users and the Council's external consultants.

Milton Keynes Accessible Transport service is becoming the public transport service for people who cannot use the bus and have no access to a car, with a choice about whether to ride by



An MK PlusBus fitter attends to one of the lunch club minibuses in the Kiln Farm depot MK PlusBus Scheduling.

minibus or taxi. Local residents are voting with their feet. Under the previous arrangements, there were about 250 regular users; today, MK PlusBus has over 1,500 members making a regular trip, and rising, and MK Taxicard already has 700 members, not all of whom make regular use of PlusBus.

The accessible transport challenge

Change on this scale and in this timeframe never occurs without incident. When the new service started, the new team at MK PlusBus were overwhelmed by additional demand. It quickly became apparent that a small group of Fastchair users, accustomed to what was in effect a personal social care system that gave them a very high number of trips each week, had not been properly informed of the likely impact of the changes. They were, unsurprisingly, very unhappy indeed with the PlusBus offer. But a thorough review of the new service by an impartial Council Scrutiny Panel in Autumn 2006 concluded that the benefits of the new arrangements outweighed any problems some individuals had experienced.

Furthermore, the Councillors recognised that they now have a Milton Keynes Accessible Transport Service that is ready for the future. There is a new social enterprise community transport in the borough, and a system capable of

innovation, change and expansion. MKCT is a local operator committed to partnership with the Council and other stakeholders. Gradually, a strategic approach to a difficult problem (and a problem that is faced by councils everywhere) is being pieced together. Planning ahead is now



UV Modular Treka bodied Mercedes-Benz Sprinters are used on MK PlusBus services.

practical, as good quality data becomes available through the new IT system.

All of this has happened in a place where there are very few voluntary sector transport services (for instance, British Red Cross provides a useful

but modest voluntary car scheme). On top of that, Milton Keynes has been designed around the car, and for non-car users and bus operators alike, it is difficult to get around. Although Arriva The Shires is introducing new low-floor vehicles, their bus fleet is not yet fully wheelchair accessible.

Ian Dyer, the Council's Passenger Transport Manager, has been closely involved in the changes over the last two years. To other Councils going on the same route he offers these thoughts: 'You have to be prepared for surprises. A Council needs to have a really good understanding of what is actually happening on the services it is supporting.'

For the last word, we will turn to Alastair Gibbons, Milton Keynes Council's Head of Social Care, who first became involved when his department's CSCI inspection raised concerns about transport for disabled people. He summed it up this way: 'By going through a really thorough review process and changing the service specifica-

tion, community transport has been transformed. We are now providing more trips to many more people than before. Naturally, there were



Since the changes, the number of regular MK PlusBus users had grown from 250 to over 1,500.

problems implementing such big changes, but the net result is overwhelmingly positive. Milton Keynes can be proud of the new services, which will be sustainable into the future.'

By Richard Armitage

Richard is an independent transport consultant, whose company provides technical assistance and development support to Milton Keynes Council.

MK Taxicard

Some of the budget previously spent on the old minibus services, about £140,000 per year, has been redirected to providing members of Milton Keynes Accessible Transport with a subsidised taxi scheme offering an accessible kerb-to-kerb service. Known as MK Taxicard, this received full Council Cabinet approval for a pilot scheme in September 2006. The trial received a positive evaluation by Milton Keynes Centre for Independent Living, and as a result went live on 1 May 2007.

MK Taxicard has about 700 members now, many of whom also use MK PlusBus. They appreciate the way the scheme has been designed, as it provides an alternative mode of travel.

There are now about 70 drivers and/or operators on the approved list. Mohamed Bandali, the Council's Accessible Transport Manager, has worked hard persuading the taxi trade to participate. Some Hackney drivers have formed new companies to bid more effectively for Council special educational needs pupil contracts, and are also looking at MK Taxicard as a revenue source.

Milton Keynes Council and Dumfries and Galloway Council are the first two local authorities to adopt the new hi-tech system developed by Stagecoach Group subsidiary National Transport Tokens.

The new system, called COPS (Concessionary Operators' Payment Scheme), uses on-board electronic terminals to read personalised smartcards issued to users by the local authority.

Smartcards are issued with an agreed concessionary value and have a photograph to ensure only those who qualify for the scheme are authorised to travel. Local authorities can set a maximum amount charged per journey and lost or

stolen cards can be discontinued, safeguarding against fraudulent claims.

Electronic information from the low-cost terminals is downloaded on to 'collection cards'. They are then posted direct to NTT for reimbursement to transport operators via BACS direct to



MK Taxicard uses the new COPS smartcard from National Transport Tokens. The taxi driver takes the subsidy off the passenger's smartcard on his portable card reader.

their bank account.

NTT distributes the cards directly to users, delivering administration cost savings of up to £20,000 to each local authority. Unused concessions can be returned to the council at the end of the financial year and the system also allows detailed analysis of concession spend to help set future budgets.

Malcolm Daughtrey, Managing Director of National Transport Tokens, said: 'This innovation ensures there is no discrimination against concessionary passengers who don't have access to bus services. It is an excellent boost to mobility and social inclusion and is extremely easy to use.'

In Milton Keynes, the smartcard is being seen by service users as a very positive aspect of MK Taxicard. They are generally finding it easy to use, with no statistics to collect and no paperwork at the point of use. People with visual impairments are very pleased with its simplicity, not least because they no longer have to mess around finding change.

By Richard Armitage

