



SCRUTINY TASK GROUP REPORT

SHOPMOBILITY

JULY 2015



1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Cheltenham Shopmobility provides equipment to help people of all ages who, for a variety of reasons, have difficulty getting around in Cheltenham town centre. With the loan of one of its 23 powered mobility scooters or 21 wheelchairs, they can get to see and enjoy the shops and sights of Cheltenham.
- 1.2 The Shopmobility unit was served notice to quit its existing premises in the Beechwood Arcade by June 2015 where it has been located since 1992. We understand that the service has now been given leave to remain in its current position in the Beechwood Arcade until November. This is good news but we still felt it was important to make the views of the task group known at this early stage with the option for us to do further work later on.
- 1.3 Officers have been working together to review the future options for the service and in view of the September deadline it was anticipated that there would be a need to be a report to Cabinet in July for a decision on the way forward. Cabinet have referred the matter to O&S so that a wider group of members can give their views on this important issue.
- 1.4 Normally terms of reference would be agreed by the O&S committee but in view of the urgency, the task group was set up by the Chief Executive in consultation with the chair and vice-chair of O&S as the Constitution allows. The group needed to move quickly so we met in June and formulated our recommendations in time to send this initial report to O&S on 29 June and then Cabinet on 14 July.
- 1.5 This report summarises our initial conclusions and we hope this will inform Cabinet in progressing this issue and we would like the task group to continue to be involved.

2. MEMBERSHIP AND TERMS OF REFERENCE

- 2.1 Membership of the task group:-
 - Councillor Jacky Fletcher (Chair)
 - Councillor John Payne
 - Councillor Louis Savage
 - Councillor Paul Baker was not able to attend the June meetings but would like to be involved if there is further work for the task group to do.

And with officer support from:

- Rosalind Reeves, Democratic Services Manager
- Wilf Tomaney, Townscape Manager
- Shirin Wotherspoon, Solicitor One Legal
- The Shopmobility staff

2.2 Terms of reference

- To understand the current situation and the need for a decision on the way forward
- To understand the financial implications and give a view on the financial viability of the service
- To gain a deeper understanding of the users of the service and their needs
- To examine how the issue is currently being progressed and the options currently on the table for location and service provision
- To ensure that the appropriate level of public consultation takes place before decisions are made
- To make recommendations to Cabinet as appropriate via O&S Committee

3. OUR FINDINGS

Fact finding at our first meeting on 15 June 2015 and a follow up visit to Shopmobility on the 24 June.



- 3.1 We held our first meeting on Monday 15th June when we were fully briefed by the Townscape manager, Wilf Tomaney. We had the opportunity to ask questions on the operation of the service from its current location and understand the future options. We visited Cheltenham Shopmobility the following week in its current location on the 1st floor of the Beechwood Arcade adjoining the multi-

storey car park. We met all the staff, some of whom had come in on their day off in order to meet us, and were impressed by their dedication and commitment to the service they provide and their knowledge of and consideration for their customers.

3.2 We summarise in the following paragraphs our impressions and some key issues to be aware of when making any decision on the future of the service.

3.3 **The current site**

The Shopmobility site is easily accessible from the multi-storey car park or the shopping centre. The service is available Monday to Saturday 9:30 am to 4.30 pm. It has a welcoming reception area with helpful staff and many information leaflets on display. There is also a mobility corner where customers can buy equipment such as walking sticks with Shopmobility receiving a small commission on any sales. There is a small office off the reception area and a large room for storing and maintaining all the equipment.

3.4 We noted on our visit that the site was extremely well stocked with equipment and we wondered whether there was any scope for reducing this, possibly enabling a move to smaller premises. Staff told us that usage was unpredictable but there had been a day recently when all the equipment had been taken out. They did feel that there was scope for reducing the total size of the site by removing the office and redesigning the reception area and this was all being quantified in preparation for the relocation.

Staffing and Budgets

3.5 The annual budget is as follows:

	2014-15 Budgeted	2014-15 Closing Account	2015-16 Budgeted
Gross	£74,250	£56,002	£81,450
Income	£13,800	£7,138	£14,000
Net	£60,450	£48,864	£67,450

3.6 A significant part of the budget is for staffing costs and amounts to about £45 k in the current budget of £81,450. It employs 2.2 fte staff (4 in total) with 2 on duty at any one time to enable a meet and greet service, lunch cover and to minimise lone working. There has formerly been a manager on site but they had not been replaced when they retired and their duties have been picked up by other staff stepping up.

3.7 The service had encouraged volunteers in the past to assist customers during their visit but this had not taken off. This could be a way to boost the social contact during the visit which would be an added benefit to some people who find shopping difficult.

3.8 The budget includes £7K for replacing equipment. A lot of the current scooters were purchased at a discount after the Paralympics in 2012. The maintenance of the machines is the main expenditure and the staff are able to do minor repairs, cleaning and battery charging on a daily basis. A technician visits every month to

do more complex maintenance and every bit of equipment is serviced twice a year. The expected life span of a mobility vehicle is about 5 years, often the battery is the first item to fail and sometimes parts can cease to be available when a particular model is discontinued. Donations of machines can be made but these are usually sold on as they cannot guarantee their safety. The Insurance was about £2k per annum. A full breakdown could be made available to the task group if required.

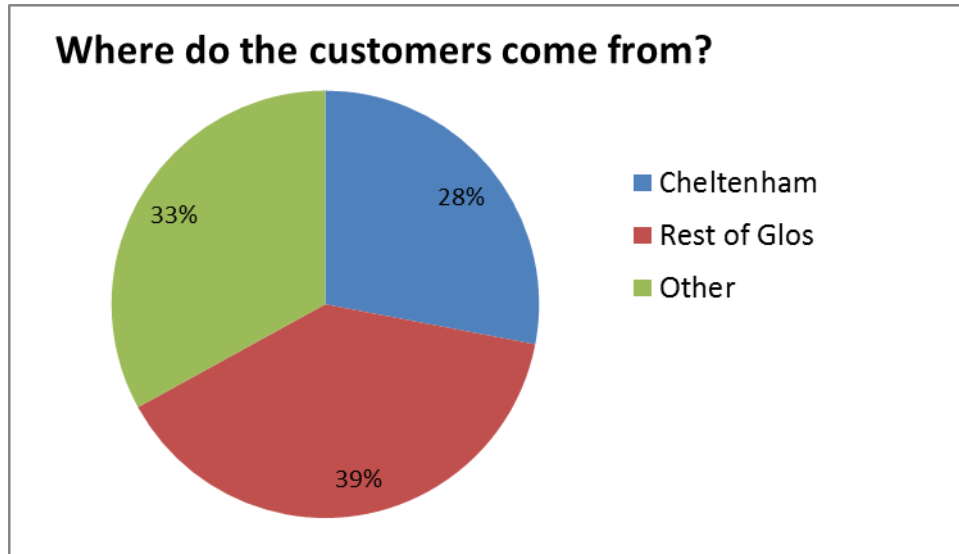


3.9 Charges for the service

Annual membership is £28 (allowing unlimited hire at no additional fee); daily membership is £7.50 (4 visits in a year gives the customer annual membership). Customers are also provided with free parking in the Beechwood Arcade but the Shopmobility service pays £2 per visit to the car park operators. We compared this with Gloucester where customers pay for their own car parking fees and £3 for a daily service or £24 for annual membership with unlimited use of vehicles.

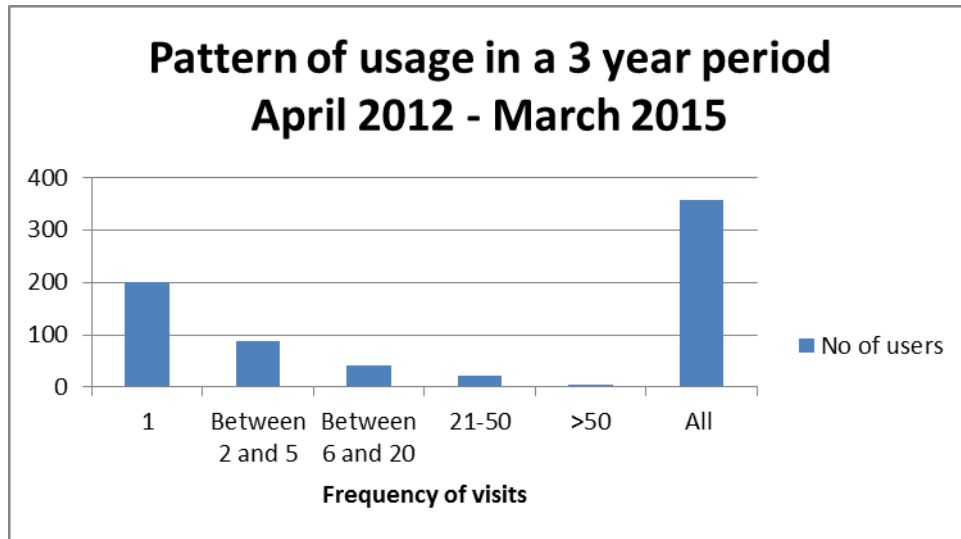
3.10 Customer Base

There is a wide customer base with customers coming from Stroud, Worcester and more recently several customers coming from Wales. Staff advised us that the customers had a wide range of disabilities including ME and MS. They had many regular customers and a typical example would be a resident in Charlton Kings who owned a mobility scooter but couldn't get it into his car and therefore he preferred to drive into town and use the Shopmobility services. Another regular was an elderly lady and coming in to use the service was her only contact with the outside world. Thus to many people the service was a 'lifeline'.



Figures were collated over a 3 year period from April 2012 to March 2015

- 3.11 During our visit the office received a phone call from a coach operator who had arrived at Cheltenham with a faulty mobility scooter and wished to hire one from Shopmobility. A member of staff was immediately dispatched with the scooter to meet the customer. Another set of customers arrived to meet up for their weekly lunch in a local pub, again providing social contact for them and contributing to the local economy. It is difficult to quantify the precise economic benefits that the users of the service bring to the town but clearly there is anecdotal evidence that it does.
- 3.12 In the main, usage was for the mobility scooters rather than the wheelchairs. Generally equipment was hired for a half day and many users turned up without pre-booking. Generally the usage pattern was unpredictable and it would be seen as a failure if someone turned up on spec and no equipment was available. Generally they only refuse people if they have no ID.
- 3.13 In terms of usage there will always be peaks and troughs. Usage had been increasing up until 2010 but there had been a sharp drop in December 2013 and this lower trend had continued. There were no identifiable reasons why the usage was dropping. We asked the staff why they thought usage was low and they felt the location was key with visitors to the Beechwood Arcade as a shopping destination decreasing. With more advertising and a more vibrant location, staff were confident the usage could be increased.



- 3.14 In March 2015, the service decided to refresh their existing database and set up a new register of current customers and since 1 April 2015 there have been 140 new registrations and 600 visits i.e. an average of 200 month.
- 3.15 There could be potential for reducing the number of days from 6 to 5 or possibly four days a week but this would not achieve a significant cost saving. This would also affect customers who had regular commitments on a certain day so we don't think this should be rushed into without a full equality impact assessment.
- 3.16 **Advertising and Promotion**
The service is advertised on the council website [Cheltenham Shopmobility](#) website but generally is not promoted widely and there could be more scope for doing this. The service is well signposted from the Beechwood Arcade and we understand there is some publicity in the bus station. One member of the task group had recently visited Newcastle and he had noticed that there was Shopmobility signposting on the ring roads into the town. Staff told us that they had tried to put leaflets in doctors' surgeries but without much success and generally the cost of advertising was prohibitive.
- 3.17 Along with a higher profile location we think promotion of the service is key to extending the customer base and bringing in more income. Initiatives to be explored could include better signage around the town, a more prominent location and setting up links with local health services, partners and charities.
- Other towns**
- 3.18 Shopmobility is a national brand, typically most services are local authority funded but there are some authorities where the service is provided by the local shopping centre, funding from the business improvement districts or charities. Generally there is a charge for the service but there are some authorities who offer it free of charge. A member of the staff had recently visited Exeter and cited this as an excellent example with a ground floor location and access from a car park. The ground floor location is important as some customers, particularly the elderly, find a multi-storey car park quite challenging.

- 3.19 On reviewing the links to provision in Exeter we found the service was run by a registered Charity – Exeter Community Transport Association. The charge was £5 a day but their charitable status also enables them to encourage donations.
- 3.20 Similarly Bristol operates from Cabot Circus as a charity managed by a Board of Trustees, over 75% of who are disabled people. By involving disabled people in this way they can ensure that their services are tailored to meet the needs of their users. They are a “not for profit” organisation funded by Bristol City Council and the shopping centre management board provide their accommodation.
- 3.21 Evesham Riverside Shopmobility is another registered charity operating the service. They have an annual membership of £15 or £5 a day for a one-off visit. Evesham Shopmobility is run by a manager and her deputy assisted by a team of very willing volunteers. They operate independently and rely on grants, donations and fund-raising to fund this vital service for the town, its residents and its visitors.
- 3.22 In Swindon the Borough Council offers the service for an annual registration of £15 and then £1 visit or a temporary day registration of £5 and £1 usage charge. Car parking is provided free for those with an annual registration.
- 3.23 With such variation between towns we feel there is more scope for seeking out good practice and learning from other councils and this is an area the task group would be happy to follow up.

4. OUR CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1 In our view there were four important questions to be addressed:

Q1 - should the service continue to be provided?

Q2 - where should it be relocated

Q3 - how will the service be financially supported

Q4 - is there an alternative method of provision

Q1 - Should it continue to be provided?

- 4.2 All members of the task group were unanimous in their view that it was an essential service to the community and must continue to be provided.

Q2 – Where should it be located?

- 4.3 Officers advised us that in order to see continued provision of Shopmobility in the town, it seems highly unlikely that this can be achieved without providing a relocation site. There is a possibility that an alternative provider could come forward with a town centre site available, but it seems unlikely. Similarly it is likely to be more difficult to find a suitable provider if the service is homeless. Therefore, whatever the delivery method, a site needs to be found.

- 4.4 The main relocation criteria officers are working to, which we would support, are:
- Proximity to the town centre
 - Easy access to car parking
 - Ease of disabled access to the site
 - Equality Act compliance in and around the site.

- Approximately 65 – 70 square metres of usable space.
- Manoeuvrability

4.5 The priority must be to find a suitable location that the service can relocate to from November 2015. We feel strongly that the location should be the right long term solution and therefore should not be selected purely on the basis of the cheapest financial option. At our first meeting the Townscape Manager talked us through the possible options that might be available and we prioritised them as follows.

1. Regent Arcade

Although some members had reservations about requiring customers to use the multi-storey car park, this option provided the most like-for-like replacement for the current service in the Beechwood Arcade. The financial attractiveness of a site on the 1st floor is that it would not require the £30,000 investment for a Portakabin which would be required if the site was located in the car park. An investment of £10,000 to transfer the service could be achievable from the current budget but any additional funding would need to be sought from alternative sources. We would encourage officers to continue to explore this option.

2. High Street (Henrietta Car Park)

The Henrietta car park is ideally situated for the new Brewery Centre in the high street and there is a good bus service close by. This option would require facilities, probably some form of Portakabin, to be put in place for storage of equipment and the reception area which make it a more costly option. Possibly some sponsorship could be sought by providing advertising at the Portakabin site.

3. The Horse and Groom site, 30 St George's Place

This site is owned by the council and is available and so would provide an immediate and cost effective solution. It could also provide options for closer links with the Wilson. Members had some reservations about the suitability of the building and the size of the car park which is not council owned but this seemed an option worth pursuing from the point of view of its cost and availability and links to the Wilson.

Q2 - How should it be financially supported?

4.6 Although the overall cost was relatively small in the overall budget of the council clearly it is still a significant cost under the tight financial constraints the council is currently working under.

4.7 Therefore it is vital that the council looks for efficiencies in the existing service and increases the usage and hence the income. This could be achieved by more effective promotion via e-mail, a more effective web presence, stronger links to tourism and establishing links with other organisations and partners, particularly those providing occupational health services.

4.8 There was no appetite by the group for charging for disabled parking in order to finance the service. This would have a negative impact on a much wider group of disabled users.

- 4.9 It was also appropriate to review the charging structure for the service. The concept of an annual fee was good for getting people to sign up to the service but in practice very high usage would result in an expensive service provision for the authority.
- 4.10 Clearly this is an area for further work for the task group once the location has been agreed but we feel the priority for the next three to four months should be to find the right location rather than try and redesign or reduce the service. That will come later once it is established in its new location.

Q4 - is there an alternative method of provision

- 4.11 The group agreed that finding alternative premises must be a top priority and once it had been established the council could look at alternative providers. This would give the council a one to two-year window to develop the appropriate links with other organisations with a view to them potentially delivering the service on the council's behalf. All options should be carefully considered and the group acknowledged that a tendering process would have to be gone through, and would be based on quality and cost of service criteria.
- 4.12 Our initial thoughts on the provider options are as follows:
- Develop a link with an existing mobility aid provider in the town – we agreed that there did not appear to be one which was suitably located for the town centre and any company might view this as competition. However we did feel there was scope for approaching providers for possible sponsorship.
 - Commission out to the voluntary sector - Clearly there is a lot of synergy with the voluntary sector and they are likely to have an active database of potential customers. The task group was advised that an informal approach had been made to such an organisation and they had expressed an interest and may welcome a town centre presence. The Cabinet Member advised us that she had also attended meetings where other partnerships had expressed an interest. Taking this option forward would depend on first finding suitable premises in the town centre.
 - Joint working with Gloucester City Council – Gloucester have a well used service and this could enable administration of the service to be jointly managed but the benefits of such an arrangement would need to be identified.
 - Develop links with a national charity operating in the town – no charities had currently been approached and again we felt premises would be an issue. The group were aware that some national age related charities may have some funding which could be sought.
 - Possible links with the Cheltenham Trust - members felt this was an interesting possibility with the potential to administer the service from the Wilson with parking close to the Wilson and storage at the Horse and Groom site. This would be an attractive option for those using the service for tourism purposes. This could potentially reduce the cost of the service as there could be a more flexible arrangement with staff working in other areas during quiet times but with an option to provide a seven-day operation.

5. CONSULTATION

- 5.1 During the course of this review we have consulted with officers involved in this issue. The Cabinet Member Healthy Lifestyles attended the site visit to shopmobility and had the opportunity to review our draft report.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Taking all our findings into consideration, the task group agreed that Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends to Cabinet that:

1. **The Shopmobility service should continue to be a service provided in the town**
2. **The priority for the next three months should be to find a suitable location taking into account the task group's assessment of the suitability of their current potential locations and then the management of the relocation with minimum disruption to the service**
3. **Stage 2 should be a more detailed review of the current service including a full financial analysis of both the costs of the service, the fees charged and some assessment of the economic benefits in time for the budget setting for 2016/17.**
4. **Subsequent to relocation, strategies to enhance the service should be considered, including partnership options with other local service providers.**
5. **The Scrutiny Task Group continue in their work giving their views directly to Cabinet or officer tasked by Cabinet to undertake work in respect of the Shopmobility service if urgency means they cannot be brought to Overview & Scrutiny Committee .**

7. PROGRESSING THE SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.1 The scrutiny task group will report to O&S on 29 June 2015 and Cabinet on 14 July 2015.
- 7.2 The scrutiny task group ask the O&S committee to endorse their initial recommendations to Cabinet and ask the scrutiny task group to continue to do further work.

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Appendices	1. One page strategy



SCRUTINY REVIEW – ONE PAGE STRATEGY

FOR COMPLETION BY THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	
Broad topic area	Shopmobility
Specific topic area	The Shopmobility unit was served notice to quit its existing premises in the Beechwood Arcade by 24 th June 2015 (since extended to November). Officers have been working with Cabinet members to review the future options for the service and in view of the September deadline it is anticipated that there will need to be a report to Cabinet in July for a decision on the way forward. Cabinet have referred the matter to O&S so that a wider group of members can give their views on this important issue.
Ambitions for the review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the current situation and the need for a decision on the way forward • Understand the financial implications and give a view on the financial viability of the service • Gain a deeper understanding of the users of the service and their needs • Understand how these issues are currently being progressed and the options currently on the table for location and provision • Monitor that the appropriate level of public consultation takes place before decisions are made
Outcomes	A summary of the views of O&S members that they would like to be considered by Cabinet when making their decision on the way forward for the service
How long should the review take?	If Cabinet are to consider the matter at the July Cabinet then any reports would be published by Monday 6 July.
Recommendations to be reported to:	O&S Committee on 29 June to be forward to Cabinet
FOR COMPLETION BY OFFICERS	
Members	Councillor John Payne Councillor Jacky Fletcher Councillor Louis Savage
Officers experts and witnesses	Wilf Tomaney, Townscape Manager
Sponsoring officer	Andrew North, Chief Executive
Facilitator	Rosalind Reeves, Democratic Services Manager
Cabinet Member	Cabinet Member Healthy Lifestyles, Councillor Rowena Hay has been nominated as the Cabinet Lead but other portfolios will be involved.
FOR COMPLETION BY THE SCRUTINY TASK GROUP	

Are there any current issues with performance?	The nature of the service provided will be reviewed. There is a trend over recent years of reducing usage.
Co-optees	None identified.
Other consultees	To be determined
Background information	Initial briefing provided by Wilf Tomaney
Suggested method of approach	Initial meeting followed by visit Shopmobility site
How will we involve the public/media? Or at what stages	The STG will need to take advice from officers regarding any confidential information in producing their final report.