



Ability Community Transport Case Study

Connecting People to Places with Flexiroute

Background

Set up in 2018, Ability provides minibus services for community groups, clubs & associations, charities, parish councils, retirement villages and communities. Travelling within the council boundaries of Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire & Milton Keynes, the services are on-demand, and their sole purpose is to connect people with places in a safe way, ultimately fighting loneliness and isolation. They operate with six minibuses across 45 different parish councils.

Embracing technology to support vital services

We had the joy of speaking to company Director Nigel Hinch, and it was clear that providing the best possible service to members of the community was top of his agenda. Beginning with the story of how Ability implemented the Flexiroute system initially,

Nigel was quick to share “we are totally reliant on the system.” He elaborated further, “when we first set up the service, there was only two of us; one driving and one booking. We would use a spreadsheet to track the pick-ups and drop-offs, but we very quickly realised that this was not the best way and we needed to invest in a transport management system.”

Like many transport departments, the charity began using spreadsheets to manage their list of clients and locations. However, this resulted in multiple versions and no certain way of guaranteeing that they were working with the most up-to-date and accurate information. Fortunately, Nigel has a background in transport and logistics, so was able to quickly realise the benefits that a transport management system would bring; as well as being able to identify key requirements.

He commented, “spreadsheets didn’t work, so I knew I needed to call Flexiroute!”. Nigel has previous experience as the Chair of another community transport scheme and had knowledge of the systems available to help. He shared, “it’s a limited market because to manage a demand responsive transport service, you need a bespoke solution and to work with a business that understands the needs of the service. We found that in Flexiroute.”

The search for a system was short, as Nigel explained “we knew all of the failures of the other systems on the market, and it was important to us that we worked with a business that understood the problems that we faced. We now know that if we need help, we can pick up the phone and speak to Mike or Dean, who truly understand what we are trying to deliver with our service. The system is perfect for our needs.”

Flexiroute provides a solution for the charity that combines a comprehensive back-office system with personalised checklists and simplified fare structures, for ease of booking and transport management. Bus drivers can securely access the information that they need to provide an exceptional service, directly from their Driver App.

The importance of safeguarding

A key concern for Nigel when considering solutions, was safeguarding. “It is alarming that other organisations print off run sheets, post them out and send them via email to their drivers. The opportunity for highly sensitive information to go missing or get into the wrong hands is a chance we are not willing to take.”

With Flexiroute, everything that our drivers need can be done within the Driver App. There is no requirement for printed information that can be lost or become inaccurate when changes are made.”

Featured within the Flexiroute system is the ability to include notes against a passenger or journey. “If there are any special requirements – such as a passenger that may need extra help getting on and off the bus – we just add a note in the system. This ensures no sensitive information is printed and that the driver always has all the information that they need to provide the best support to our passengers. Our drivers are totally reliant on the system.”

The social value of the service has become essential to members of the community. Nigel and Lynn are heavily aware of the impact that the recent lockdowns have had on the wellbeing and independence of many of their elderly passengers.

Utilising the Flexiroute system, they have been able to grow their services substantially, unlike regular bus service providers that have still not yet returned to even 75% of the capacities they were experiencing pre-Covid.

Real-time updates

Utilising the live mapping and automated booking within the system has proven an essential timesaving solution for the back-office team. “The system is connected to real-time mapping and takes into account and delays that we may not have otherwise been aware of. If there is a road closure or traffic, it automatically updates the journey times.

This is a big help for us when passengers phone us to get updates on where our buses are. We no longer need to phone the driver to see where they are, we can give instant live updates to reassure passengers, straight from the system.”

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Nigel Hinch,
Company Director,
Ability Community Transport

Managing driver information

The Flexiroute solution features a tailored Driver App. This links with the back-office system and provides drivers with all of the information that they need to do their job. Drivers save time by managing their bookings and navigating to their locations from within the app. The fully digital process ensures that they maintain the strict safeguarding standards set out by the charity.

Nigel commented, “previously we would have needed satnav kits for our drivers, but now they are able to get all of the information that they need for their journey from the Driver App. It makes life much easier knowing that they can click on their next pickup and instantly get a map and directions to where they need to be, without having to type in the details each time.”

Maintaining compliance

A key takeaway for the team at Ability is the efficient management of bookings and compliance standards. Nigel shared, “from a management point of view, the system really helps with our compliance.

All operators are required to have vehicle inspections every ten weeks and we can easily manage this within the system. This is a really useful function.” Nigel emphasised the importance of up-to-date information, “the more that you can adapt your procedures to work with your system, the better. It is so important not to rely on spreadsheets with duplicated information – the Flexiroute system lets you manage all of your data in one place.”

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“Using the system, we can factor in the time it may take to help passengers with their shopping or plugging in their seatbelts. Our live mapping then lets us check that they’re running to schedule.”

Nigel Hinch,
Company Director,
Ability Community Transport