SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

AGE AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

SUBMISSION FROM THE COMMUNITY TRANSPORT ASSOCIATION

WHO WE ARE

The Community Transport Association (CTA) is the national membership association for community transport operators across Scotland and the rest of the UK. Our vision is to see community transport thriving across the UK, enabling people to live independently, participate in their community, and access education, employment, health and other services.

PREVALENCE AND IMPACTS OF SOCIAL ISOLATION

There is growing evidence that loneliness in old age exacerbates health problems. Psychologists at the University of Chicago and Ohio State University have shown that people who are socially isolated develop changes in their immune system, which leads to a condition called chronic inflammation. One of the people conducting the study was Dr Lisa Jaremka, who said "It was a struggle for a long time for physicians to recognise the importance of loneliness in health. We now know how important it is to understand patients' social worlds."

Time and again, across the UK when older people are asked about the facilities they need, transport comes close to the top of the list. However, transport is close to the bottom of the list of priorities in planning for old age within public bodies. The CTA’s contribution to this investigation is focused specifically on transport and its impact on older people’s lives.

No single agency has a statutory responsibility to ensure that older people have good transport services and this has led to a tendency to “pass the buck” when it comes to transport matters. Much better collaboration is required so that all agencies including health and social services as well as transport authorities are contributing to ensuring that older people have the transport they need. Transport should be better embedded within planning of older people’s services and not left as an awkward problem for others to resolve.

If older people do not have transport then their ability to connect with friends and family and to get out and about and access basic amenities is reduced, leading to social isolation. Getting out of the house with a sense of purpose provides a highlight to an otherwise flat week for many, and is a way of extending networks of friends and acquaintances, often considered by older people to be more important than sources of more formal help. Without transport many services for older people such as lunch clubs and day centres simply can’t function.

As they get older, people want to have control of their lives, be independent and stay in their own homes. They fear loneliness and want to do things with their friends and family - doing similar things to when they were younger but with a different emphasis. Without transport many of these things are just not possible for older people.
Transport planning is not sufficiently alive to the huge demographic changes which are taking place across the country. As a SPARC (Strategic Promotion of Ageing Research Capacity) funded report compiled by Leeds University in 2008 found “Mainstream transport planning does not recognise that the travel itself and the feeling of independence are often more important than the destination for older people. For instance, shopping is more than just buying food or clothes; it is an experience, a reason to go out and interact with others.” Transport planning has not moved much further forward in relation to older people’s needs in the seven years since that report. Indeed in some ways the situation has deteriorated as there has been a steady decline in bus service provision across the country during this time.

There is a disparity between the priorities of commissioners and users of services. The 2011 report into ageing - “A Life Worth Living” - which was commissioned by the Carnegie UK Trust and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations found that commissioners are more concerned about when and what specific services are provided whereas service users are more concerned about the nature and quality of services. For example, commissioners pay no attention to whether the people providing a service for older people have the time or inclination (or permission) to offer companionship, human warmth or do anything else that is not on the prescribed list of duties. In relation to transport, older people value the assistance they get with bags on a shopping trip, drivers they are familiar with or the company of others as much as the actual transport, yet these important factors are not considered by commissioners of transport services.

Community transport, where people in a local community design and run their own services, is proving to be a better solution for people who are vulnerable to isolation than many other forms of transport provision. Transport per se is rarely the motivation for people getting involved in community transport but rather a desire to help people in need and make their neighbourhoods better places to live. They see transport as a mechanism for achieving this. Drivers and/or passenger assistants will assist an older person down stairs in a tenement building, assist with shopping bags, ensure the older person is strapped in securely in a vehicle and sometimes go well beyond this by ensuring that the older person is safe at home and that basic requirements such as heat, food, and medical prescriptions are available. Treating people in accordance with their specific needs is what marks out community transport from all other transport services.

IDEAS THAT COULD BE SHARED ACROSS SCOTLAND

In those areas where community transport services exist, people have more opportunity to be free from loneliness and isolation because it is easier for them to connect with others.

The recently published 2015 Community Transport State of the Sector report for Scotland showed that older people are the biggest users of community transport. The report also showed that social outings was the most frequent purpose for which community transport is used, which highlights the fact that transport is not simply a matter of getting people from place to place but is crucial for enabling people to meet with others and to live fulfilled lives.

In 2013 CTA interviewed around 100 older people who use community transport services as part of the “Stitch in Time” programme. This programme examined third
sector interventions into care for older people and was managed by Evaluation Support Scotland. It included evidence of the impact which community transport has on older people’s lives. The following quote from a lady in Grangemouth was typical of the comments made by the older people who were interviewed:

“The Dial a Journey bus is my lifeline. It’s the only means I have of getting out. I use it three times a week. Don’t get out much. This is one of the highlights of my week. I wouldn’t get here without DAJ. I look forward to getting the bus to come down here – the rest of the time I’m stuck in the house. I’m quite happy on my own in the house most of the time but just a wee jaunt out now and again is great.”

Community transport forms where people want to do something about the gaps in public services and decide to set up services themselves, usually focused on transport for older and disabled people. Such services can get off the ground if they are supported and local authorities are usually the most important source of support. The geographical spread of community transport services is however quite patchy and so people’s opportunity to benefit from community transport depends on where they live and whether public bodies in the area are supportive of such initiatives. In recent years it has been extremely difficult to secure this kind of support for new services and so there have been few new start-ups in the past few years though there is evidence that the demand for such services is growing rapidly. Some local authorities are quite supportive and others do very little to support community transport. Despite the fact that providing access to health services is another major purpose for which community transport is used, the support from NHS bodies across Scotland for community transport is almost negligible.

CTA’s idea for improving the lives of people who are socially isolated is for the new health and social care partnerships which will form during 2015 to place transport high on their agenda when considering the allocation of their resources. Traditionally people involved in planning care services and health services have not factored transport into their plans sufficiently and it is partly as a consequence of this that older people are often isolated and struggle to access basic services. There are dozens of examples of community groups around Scotland who are making a significant difference to the quality of life for the older people they assist through providing transport. They can run these services at a lower cost than the public and commercial sectors. Such services should be shown long term commitment and should be supported further by the new partnerships so as to develop their services to meet a growing demand. In areas where there are currently few if any community transport services, the new partnerships should help to stimulate local interest and provide support when local people are willing to give of their time to establish transport for their neighbours who are vulnerable to isolation.

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