1. **Background**

Berwickshire Wheels is a community transport service that has existed since 2002. The service operates under the umbrella of the Berwickshire Association of Voluntary Service (BAVS) its parent organisation. The service relies on BAVS to provide premises, administration, staffing, management support and the operating infrastructure. BAVS employs a Project Development Officer (22 hours per week) and provides part time administration support (5 hours per week). The Project Development Officer receives telephone requests from registered service users who are asked to provide as much notice as possible. The service relies on volunteer drivers recruited from the local area who give up their own time to drive the Wheels vehicles on a day to day basis. These volunteers are normally contacted once per week and asked whether they can assist with bookings for the following week. Full details of the journey, the client and any necessary additional information are provided to the driver at that time.

2. **Drivers**

There are currently 23 regular volunteer drivers, although at any one time a number of these volunteers are not able to drive for a variety of reasons. The volunteers normally drive from one of three venues in Berwickshire i.e. Duns, Eyemouth and Coldstream; sixteen of the volunteers are male with the majority over 60 years.

A number of organisations such as Community Integrated Care have their own drivers who have passed through a familiarisation test with Berwickshire Wheels and convey their clients in the Wheels vehicles.

3. **Vehicles**

The service currently has a fleet of six vehicles as follows:

- **Duns** – 2008 Citroen Relay long wheelbase minibus equipped to carry 8 foot passengers and two wheelchairs; 2004 Citroen Relay short wheelbase minibus equipped to carry 5 foot passengers and one wheelchair; 2007 Fiat Doblo car fitted with wheelchair fittings to carry one wheelchair and one passenger or 4 passengers; a 2003 Vauxhall Zafira 5 seat hatchback.

- **Eyemouth** – 2008 2008 Citroen Relay long wheelbase minibus equipped to carry 9 foot passengers and two wheelchairs.

- **Coldstream** – 2006 Renault Master short wheelbase minibus equipped to carry 7 foot passengers or 5 foot passengers and one wheelchair.

All the minibuses have two passenger seats in the cab of the vehicle alongside the driver but passengers need to be relatively mobile to climb into the cab in order to carry the maximum number of passengers.
4. Costs and general statistics
The financial year just ended 1 April 2012 – 31 March 2013 required BAVS to replace two vehicles and purchase an additional vehicle to bring the fleet up to its current standard and size. The Renault was purchased in April 2012 £11,000; the two long wheelbase Citroen’s £15,000 each in November 2012 and January 2013. Other costs included maintenance all vehicles £5,569.08 and fuel all vehicles £9,165.95. Therefore the cost of running the fleet during the last financial year was £55,735; this figure does not include staff and other related costs.
The vehicles travelled 42,247 miles during the year.
From the beginning of November 2012 additional information was collated to provide a better picture of the business, so for 5 months:
Volunteer hours = 779
Passenger numbers = 1501
Passenger journeys = 2294 of which 1580 were classified as social, 415 as health, 201 for shopping and 94 just transport. The recording of passengers journeys is considered an industry standard.
Driver posts in the commercial sector attract a wage in the region of £8 per hour with on costs; our volunteers have therefore in 5 months added value in the region of £6,200.

5. Service users
Berwickshire Wheels has 130 registered service users who can be considered as regular users. Of this number 55 are new registrations under the ‘taxi to health care scheme’ (see next paragraph).
Service users needs are varied but in the main require transport to health appointments, for their shopping needs, attendance at social groups or to make connections with public transport. Some examples are outlined below:
Mrs L from Coldstream has considerable mobility difficulty and has regular appointments at the local health centre;
Mr S from Gavinton has no access to a car or public transport and is taken to the supermarket in Duns for the weekly shop;
Eight residents from Eyemouth and surrounding villages are transported to a WRVS day centre at Eyemouth Church every Tuesday and Thursday, they are collected from their homes to arrive by 10am and are picked up again at 2.30pm. All are in their 80’s and 90’s and are lifted into the minibus using the rear tail lift because they can not negotiate the side step or get into a car.
Eight residents from Duns and the surrounding villages to a lunch club every Wednesday.
Mrs O from Duns has very limited sight and is collected from home to connect with the bus service to Galashiels every Thursday morning.
Groups from a number of care home providers are taken out for day trips to local garden centres or other establishments where they can enjoy a shopping experience and lunch. Research is required to ensure that fish and chips are always on the menu!
On many occasions little notice is given particularly for health appointments.
6. **Taxi to Health Care pilot**
Scottish Borders Council with support from Berwickshire Wheels began a 6 month pilot on 1 March 2013 to provide Berwickshire residents with free transport to health appointments. The scheme is only available to holders of a concessionary bus pass and is not available for residents living in the main towns unless they are disabled. Residents who require transport to the Borders General Hospital are to be transported to one of the main towns to connect with the regular public transport bus service. Thus far 55 have registered under the scheme and five have booked trips to local health centres. Berwickshire Wheels will invoice Scottish Borders Council £1 per mile for these journeys.

7. **Income**
Berwickshire Wheels receives the following grants from Scottish Borders Council:
- Community Transport Grant = £10,450
- Social Car Scheme allowance = £8,970

Notification was received shortly before the end of the last financial year that these grants would be subject to a 41% reduction for 2013/2014. As the result of considerable lobbying by the Borders community transport network this decision was rescinded and the grants will remain the same for this financial year. However there was a clear indication that a reduction will be probably 2014/2015.

The social car scheme allowance is claimed on a monthly basis relating to the eligible miles travelled by Wheels vehicles transporting service users eligible under the scheme. Our total claim for the last financial was fractionally under the allowance.

Berwickshire Wheels holds a section 19 permit and can make 6 monthly claims through the bus service operators grants (BSOG). Such claims again relate to the miles travelled conveying service users eligible under the scheme. Our BSOG claim for 1 April 2012 to 30 September 2012 amounted to £4,200. The claim for the last 6 months is likely to be of a similar amount.

Therefore our grant income for the financial year 1 April 2012 to 31 March 2013 will be approximately £27,700.

Berwickshire Wheels make charges to our service users depending on their circumstances:
- Those eligible under the social car scheme 25p per mile with a minimum charge of £3;
- Those not eligible under the scheme 60p per mile with a minimum charge of £4 (very few of our users fall into this category);
- Group bookings i.e. more than 3 passengers 75p per mile for the first 100 miles and £1 per mile thereafter;
- Not for profit organisation group bookings e.g. Eyemouth male voice choir 60p per mile.

These charges have resulted in an expected income of £6,929 for the last financial year; unfortunately we suffer from debtors like every organisation. Our total income for the last financial year is just short of £35,000, this figure does not include some small donations from individuals and groups
received during the year. We therefore have outgoings of £55,735 as detailed in paragraph 4 and income of £35,000 for the last financial year.

8. Issues
a) National and local Government are using the third sector to provide a valuable and much needed community transport system without adequate compensation. The notion of supporting the system by fund raising activities has become seen as the norm. In the case of Berwickshire Wheels if we were not closely linked to BAVS and supported by that organisation and the excellent efforts of the managers and volunteers at the three charity shops we would not exist.
b) Before my time I understand that central Government funding was available for vehicle purchase, more recently that funding was devolved to local Government. As can be seen Berwickshire Wheels does not receive sufficient funding to enable regular update of vehicles.
c) The Scottish Ambulance Service is in the process of reducing its free passenger transport service and is referring people needing transport to the Borders Genera Hospital to Community Transport providers. The Social Car Scheme and the Taxi to Health Care pilot do not permit Berwickshire Wheels to claim for any miles travelled conveying service users to the BGH for consultant appointments. The result is that we have to charge our users 60p per mile, a journey from Duns area to BGH and return results in an invoice for £30 for the individual. Providing this transport is one of the biggest problems for volunteer drivers because there is no certainty of the time involved waiting for the passengers.
d) The regular feedback from our service users is that Berwickshire Wheels is an essential service that is often their only means of getting out of the house. In some cases our volunteer drivers are the only people they see from one week to the next.

9. Priorities
Adequately compensate third sector providers for the service they operate. We are not interested in making a profit but we would like to operate a reliable and safe fleet of vehicles.
Support for the third sector in seeking volunteers, there is some sense that the community is becoming volunteer fatigued?
If the Scottish Ambulance Service is to concentrate on the emergency side of its business then wield Parliamentary power to devolve funding to community transport to provide the much needed transport arrangements for those who most need such transport. For us to adequately deal with this responsibility there will be a need to employ drivers and not rely on volunteers.

Allister Hart
Project Development Officer
Berwickshire Wheels
23 April 2013