Buchan Dial-a-Community Bus; an insight.

Buchan Dial-a-Community Bus (DACB) is a growing social enterprise in North East Aberdeenshire, focusing on reducing social exclusion through the provision of high quality community transport delivery and support services. It is a community owned Company Limited by Guarantee and Scottish Charity which has been operating for over 16 years.

Originally DACB operated in the 1990’s as a weekly service, utilising a borrowed social work minibus, driven by off duty police officers.

Since 2000 we have evolved into a major transport provider in the Aberdeen City and shire, and currently run several services locally including door to door shopping service, Demand responsive transport Including transport to medical appts etc), evening youth transport, library visits, community group use as well as shopmobility. We provide thousands of passenger journeys using minibuses under S19 permits, a MPV and a volunteer community car scheme.

None of these services are commercially viable but all provide an essential link for elderly, disabled, rurally and socially isolated people in Buchan.

In August 2010 we expanded our services in to Aberdeen City with the addition of 3 services under Contract to Aberdeen City council providing transport for school children with assisted needs and extremely vulnerable adults with a variety of Special needs.

DACB created one of the first Community Interest Companies in Aberdeenshire (DAB Plus) when they opened a separate business to create a surplus which then feeds into the DACB charity, thereby hopefully reducing the organisation’s long term reliance on grant funding.

In 2010 DAB Plus launched their Training Dept; providing D1, Driver CPC training and a range of other Driver training such as (MiDAS), MiDAS for cars, Passenger Assistant (PATS) training and a range of Emergency evacuation procedure training programmes. We are a preferred supplier of MiDAS and PATS to Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen
City Council and as well as providing training to many voluntary and 3rd sector groups.

DAB Plus also operates an O licence (PSV) private hire service to the local area and in August 2010, under contract to Aberdeenshire Council, they started to provide 3 mainstream school bus transport services within the Buchan Area.

DACB/DAB Plus aim to provide the very best services achievable whilst adhering to the utmost levels of quality.

Vehicles are maintained to the highest standards including 6-8 week inspections, lift services / tests, regular and intensive maintenance etc. Staff and volunteers are trained to the appropriate levels and our administration systems comply with all expectations/requirements.

DACB/DAB Plus currently have between them; 13 staff and 50+ volunteers who include; 4 volunteer Directors and a Company Secretary as well as a volunteer Management Board; all of who are skilled at multi-tasking. Thus the General Manager is qualified to drive the minibuses, the lead driver is a MiDAS trainer, one Board Member is also a MiDAS and PATs trainer. Another is a PATs trainer.

This partnership and team work between the volunteer and paid staff at DACB/DAB Plus is the essence of our success. As an organisation we strive to ensure that all volunteer staff benefit in a personal capacity from their involvement with the services we provide. The degree of volunteer input, and their understanding of our users’ needs results in a true feeling that the organisation is owned and driven by the community which it serves.

We work closely with partner organisations such as Police Scotland (formerly Grampian Police) and Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City Councils.

One management committee member is the local Community Learning Worker who is a vital link to local youth forums and expertise.

The MiDAS trainer/Board Member previously mentioned is a serving police officer. Police Scotland (previously Grampian Police) have allowed him the time necessary to conduct training and other DACB related activities; including management, strategy work and mentoring.

As part of this partnership, we offer MiDAS for cars, Minibus Emergency Evacuation and PATS training for young police cadets before offering each one a week’s community placement with the organisations.
The success of DACB is further demonstrated by low staff turnover and a high volunteer retention rate. We have also provided a route into employment for several volunteers who have taken up paid posts within DACB over the years.

We are very committed to our Equal Opportunities policy; with the behaviour of equality for all being deeply entrenched in the ethos of both DACB and DAB Plus. This relaxed, inclusive attitude is evidenced by the fact that not only do we work with many people of differing backgrounds; we also have staff who could be said to be in minority groups.

We have no barriers to the client groups that we carry and over the years we have worked with a range of individuals including; people for whom English is a second language, recovering addicts, transsexuals and a great many other minority groups. We value integration and open acceptance throughout the organisations and under no circumstances do we allow any type of discrimination by clients, staff or volunteers.

**Community Transport; the issues.**

When DACB purchased the first two buses in 2000 and started the 5 day per week shopping service, we knew that we were potentially opening a can of worms. What we have come to realise over the years is that every worm in that original can, has its own can of worms. The more we have done, the bigger the problem seems to get!

A question regularly asked by funders is; “what is your exit strategy?” DACB has a standard response that we do not have an exit strategy, nor do we feel that we will ever have one. This is because we know that the problem of providing accessible, safe, affordable transport to those most vulnerable and disenfranchised in Scotland will not go away/be resolved.

Scotland (and the UK as a whole) has an aging population as well as a culture of non-interference. I.e. we do not have large family units living closely and supporting themselves/each other.

We also have new ways of supporting people and encouraging people to live more independently within their communities, as well as changes to the welfare systems which will impact on the provision of services etc

Since, as a nation, we have fewer resources and greater statutory responsibilities it seems inevitable that some areas, such as CT; where there is no financial gain to entice private business and not enough volume of need to demand involvement at a statutory level, will fall through the cracks and become the purview of the voluntary sector.

CT is historically been provided by the voluntary sector and/or local community activists with emphasis being on the needs of the individual/community. This has the effect of creating several different
types of CT. This could be an issue in that there is no one model which can be instantly and cost effectively installed generically throughout the country. However what is provided are cost effective transport projects which are successful in addressing the needs of the community.

**Funding:**
There has been sporadic funding both locally and nationally with the most successful being the Govt’s Rural Community Transport Initiative (RCTI) and latterly the equivalent urban initiative. The decision to divert the RCTI/UCTI funding to Local Authorities without ring fencing it proved to be disastrous for many communities and CT groups since LA’s absorbed the funding into the larger budget and in many cases decided to no longer support CT in their community. In other areas funding has been cut, or only been accessible for certain projects/types of service. Over the last 2-3 years we have witnessed CT groups closing down, having to reduce services or run vehicles well past their prime. Capital funding has become virtually impossible for CT projects and replacing buses is becoming a major issue across Scotland. DACB has a constant “bus replacement” fundraising campaign but we are still having to operate vehicles that are 13 years old. This is having an impact on our running costs since there are considerably higher maintenance and downtime costs.

A reduction in funding, both capital and revenue, has had a severely detrimental effect on CT in Scotland. Whereas not every voluntary group requires funding and in the past funding has been inefficient and perhaps has not delivered value for money, in terms of CT provision this is generally not true. CT groups provide extremely valuable services within their communities.

CT groups have high costs and high levels of legislative responsibility. A reduction in funding more often than not means a necessary reduction in provision and at the worst an unavoidable reduction in standards.

This is not only unacceptable for our clients; who are amongst the most vulnerable in Scotland’s communities, but it could also have an impact on passenger and road safety.

Funding for CT will always be necessary; however the same can be said for much of Scotland’s Public Transport services. Many Public Transport routes are supported through subsidy, we do not feel that this is any different to CT schemes receiving grant subsidy.

We would take this opportunity to thank Transport Scotland/Scottish Govt for the changes in BSOG. This has made a vital difference to CT operators; specifically those in rural areas, and has supported the services a great deal.
**Social Enterprise:**
Over the last few years there has been a shift towards encouraging charities/communities to become more self-sustaining by creating Social enterprises/commercial arms and tendering for contracts/ starting commercial operations.
This can be successful for larger CT groups who have the infrastructure and ability to move into commercial enterprise. However, the majority of CT groups are small voluntary organisations run by volunteers. Social / Commercial enterprise is often one step too far for these groups. Their remit / “need” is to help their community, not to run businesses. They have neither the desire nor, often the skills, to run a commercial enterprise with the risks and the business issues therein.
From experience, it is very hard to change from a charity...with all the mind set and understanding of charitable purposes, to a business. We manage both a charity (CT group) and a Social Enterprise and it has been a very difficult transition from a grant subsidised “breaking even” mind-set to making a profit, selling to the commercial sector and operating in the business environment.
In our opinion social enterprise is not as easy as people would have us believe and is not a universal panacea.
For this reason we strongly believe that grant funding is still a necessity for many CT groups.

**Legislation:**
CT groups struggle with legislation issues on a regular basis.
The legal implications of driving a minibus can be quite frightening and trying to ensure drivers are driving; legally, correctly and safely can be quite difficult.
Even ensuring the driver is actually qualified to drive a 9-16 seat bus can be complex. A driver must have a D1 (101) on his licence. Or, if he gained the licence after 1997 he can drive a minibus as a volunteer only. But only if he is over 21 and the vehicle is less than 3.5 t (or 4.25t accessible) in weight. With vehicles getting heavier and heavier (the standard is now over 5t) getting a lighter minibus is now quite difficult.

The answer to this issue is to train drivers to D1 (small minibus PSV) level. But it costs between £800 and 1,000 per driver to do so; a lot of money for a voluntary organisation. This can be prohibitive to many groups. This has implications on the role of the volunteer, how to recruit and retain the volunteer and raises concerns about the future of volunteering within the CT sector.
Once a group has got their driver there is the issues of operating a minibus. VOSA rightly insists that minibuses are driven and maintained to a very high level, with daily walk round checks, 6-8 week maintenance checks, and regular servicing etc.
Buses also must have the correct permits; community permits are easy to get but getting the right one for their needs can be confusing to many groups. This is one of the many areas where the help and advice from the Community Transport Association is invaluable. However with funding issues being what they are, the CTA face their own fight for sustainability, which again weakens the stability of the CT sector.

**Concessionary Fares:**
The lack of concessionary fares to CT services is abysmal and is vastly unfair to the elderly and frail people who cannot access public transport services. They can watch business people who are over 60 use their bus passes to go to work and visit areas of Scotland; all for free, whereas they cannot go shopping, to the doctor or even past their own front door without help. And where that help is actually available; it will cost them. However giving CT projects access to concessionary fares would not be an instant solution. There are issues;

The partial reimbursement of 60% approx. would not cover CT’s costs and since we cannot “sell” the extra spare seats as commercial organisations can, there would instantly be a shortfall. Reimbursement would have to be full cost recovery.
The back office costs for concessionary fares (approx. £10k for a ticket machines etc) would be impossible for CT operators to afford. Aberdeenshire council provide this back office service for nothing; if other councils or Transport Scotland could offer something similar, this would help a great deal.

**Conclusion:**
There is a great will within the communities of Scotland to provide excellent Community Transport. However there are issues that prevent services being started / continued. And in fact some create such financial and other hardships that CT groups close their doors and stop providing transport. We hope that this enquiry would highlight these and start the process of working through the issues in order to create an environment where CT could flourish for the best of every person/community in Scotland.

**Buchan Dial-a-Community Bus**
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