COMMUNITY TRANSPORT INQUIRY
BUCKIE ACCESSIBLE BUS SCHEME
WRITTEN SUBMISSION

Summary of current situation:

Buckie Accessible Bus Scheme was formed to provide affordable, accessible transport for the disadvantaged members of the community in and around Buckie and to offer transport to those who are socially excluded by lack of a public transport service. The service operates along the coastal villages from Cullen picking up through to and including Garmouth and Lhanbryde, travelling on into Elgin. There are daily services from Monday through to Friday taking passengers into Elgin (601). A twice-weekly service operates into Buckie from surrounding villages (603). A Keith Town service on Fridays was introduced in 2007 and has proved to be very popular; a second service was introduced on Tuesdays in October 2012 (602). In addition regular outings enable social inclusion and the opportunity for members to make new friends with visits to places of interest. These are organised independently by the Friends of BABS/Members Social Committee. They also organise twice a year 4 day short holidays for small groups of 10/12 persons with two volunteer staff in attendance.

We do private hire for local groups, care homes etc, as well as individual journeys for customers needing to travel to medical appointments, normally in a small vehicle, which will carry one person in a wheelchair + 2 passengers + driver.

The customer base is operated by membership, which is free and is available to any persons who have difficulty in accessing normal public transport because of age or infirmity either physical or mental or who have no public transport service and who live within or are temporarily resident in the aforementioned areas. It is hoped to expand to cover other villages and areas inland from the coast also.

Situation at present:

Moray Council has cut ALL bus subsidies, which means in theory that most of the subsidised rural services will cease by June 22nd and the Moray Council Passenger Transport Unit will have to work out what it can do to replace what is missing. At the council budget vote in February 2012, Alan Wright the then Depute Convener asked that the PTU work in partnership with the 3rd Sector, specifically mentioning BABS, to provide a co-ordinated service for all in Moray. 12 months on, it seems that they are looking at this at long last, as we have been invited to submit our daily running costs for replacing their vehicles on the Dial M for Moray services in the Buckie and Keith areas and there will be discussions once the Council has read and accepted the impact assessment necessary before the subsidies become effective. Thus we may be doing extra
work within our own area.

Areas for Improvement:

- Funding:
Our original £80K grant from the Scottish Government’s Rural Transport Initiative was passed to Moray Council after 2007, and since then it has been cut drastically. Three years ago we were asked to cut our expenditure by £30K (from £70K) during the financial year, which we managed. The following year the proposed council budget talked of “re-designing” BABS Dial-a-Bus services to save £40K. We asked repeatedly what exactly this meant, but never had a reply, and when the budget was accepted by the council members, some of our local representatives rang us to say that we had received our £40K grant. However, we had a letter from the PTU telling us that our grant was cut to £0 and that they presumed we would be going out of business. We mounted a massive press campaign and they eventually gave us the £30K we had not spent the previous year. Since then it has been a constant battle to maintain our grant funding, using up a lot of our time - NB we have already had a 67.5% cut since the funding began. With increased efficiency, more volunteer hours and enhanced fund raising we have managed to stay afloat with our heads just above water. As a result we are unable to produce a firm business plan over the next 4/5 years to prove sustainability, which lessens even further our chances of lease-purchasing newer, greener, more efficient vehicles.

- Vehicles:
The cuts forced us to use up any reserves to stay alive, so we have not been able to renew our aging fleet. One 12 year old vehicle expired last year and we were fortunate to receive a small legacy from one of our customers which helped us buy a 6 year old low mileage minibus, which we have converted. We still have a 7 year old vehicle bought with Scottish Government money, which has proved very expensive to run and maintain, and which is now approaching 100,000 miles. It is averaging 19mpg, whereas a newer vehicle will do 30+ mpg. We are still contemplating buying another older but low mileage vehicle which will not be as comfortable as the coach built vehicle it will replace, but will at least be much cheaper to run. Our vehicles are:

  56 reg Optare Alero - 91,000 miles
  07 reg Peugeot Boxer LWB 36000miles
  02 reg Renault Master SWB 30000 miles
  54 reg Fiat Doblo small van conversion with wheelchair access 55000 miles.

Obviously our maintenance costs are increasing as the vehicles age.

- Partnership Working:
As explained above, we have had little help or co-operation from the Moray PTU. Indeed last year they introduced Dial M for Moray services 5 days a week in both Buckie and Keith, duplicating our services, which we still feel was not at all in the spirit of partnership. They claim they cover a different market, ie non elderly or disabled, but their vehicles are fully wheelchair accessible and their brochures make great mention of this.
- **Concession Fares**
  Our 601/602/603 fares enable our clients to go shopping, go to other personal business appointments, or even the medical practice in Buckie or the hospitals in Keith, Buckie and Elgin using their concession card. But our revenues are not as high as they should be, firstly because of the reduction in percentage of the full fare refunded by Transport Scotland, secondly because the amount of money set by the Scottish Government is not sufficient to pay all of the revenue due (ie it runs out before the end of the year), and thirdly because the ticket machines are managed by Moray Council PTU “back office” who have not yet managed to load into these machines our fare increases which we passed to them at the beginning of last September for a start date of October 1st 2012. Admittedly the software and machines seem unreliable, but a 6 month delay is unacceptable.

- **Customer Base:**
  The people who use our service are very happy with the services we provide, but they normally ring us for the first time out of the blue, because of a lack of mobility due to death of partner, his/her decision to stop driving etc. Despite our high level press coverage in the local papers, they do not understand exactly what we offer (like the PTU and some council members); we have inundated surgeries, care homes, all local gathering places with pamphlets, but we gain most new members through word of mouth. We are convinced that there are many potential customers out there who could be eligible, but are using expensive taxis. Curiously there is also a sort of inverted snobbery, as some see having to resort to using our services as embarrassing or a lowering in social standing.

- **Growing demand**
  We are in an area popular for retirement; many people go south or abroad to work, and return here when retirement occurs. And many people from all over the UK choose this area for retirement as well. Thus the potential numbers of users is ever-increasing and we will need to invest in more vehicles to satisfy demand.

- **Joined-up thinking**
  There is obviously a real need for a combined strategic approach to transport provision for everyone, and there are too many vested interests acting only for their own jobs. There is a lack of a sense of community togetherness. Once a co-ordinated system is set up, easy to understand information has to be readily available to all potential users. Also, council departments have their own separate budgets, and there would appear to be little recognition that a service like ours is providing transport (PTU) and satisfying social needs (Community Services) - ie across 2 separate budgets. The PTU’s argument is always that they will not provide a grant for work which is on behalf of Community Services. Our buses are very much rolling social clubs, where (mostly) pensioners living alone can get to the shops and meet people. They are entitled to business and recreational Travel (EU, UK, Scottish Government), and some have said that, without us, they would go into a care home sooner, at a cost of at least £25000 per annum per person.
The operation of Community Transport is at the moment covered by Section 19 and 22 permits, but interpretations as to their use is complicated - a clearer system would be beneficial.

In rural areas, one vehicle could probably cope with most of the demand, from elderly, disabled and able-bodied people, but our charitable status as providing normally for disabled people makes this difficult. We say that we help all transport-disadvantaged people, which would include, for example, a young mother with small children living in a remote village with no bus service. As it is, many of our customers in urban Buckie are unable to walk to the nearest bus-stop, or carry their shopping into the house, which we do for them.

Conclusion:

We have been in operation for 13 years under ever changing circumstances, and it has to be said that it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain, let alone improve and extend the services we offer. In the present economic climate it is obviously necessary for us to become as self-sufficient as we can, but the danger is that we could lose our BABS “ethos” as a concerned and caring organisation if we take on too much commercial business. Rules, regulations and the application thereof do not help.

We trust that this submission will give you a clearer idea of how things are in Moray with 3rd sector community transport from our point of view. Please view the video on our website - www.babsbus.co.uk - for a customer appreciation of what we do.

Buckie Accessible Bus Scheme
26 March 2013