COMMUNITY TRANSPORT INQUIRY

COMMUNITY CENTRAL HALL

WRITTEN SUBMISSION

BACKGROUND

Community Central Hall is a Development Trust located in Maryhill, in North West Glasgow. It was established in 1976 and has been involved supporting or operating Community Transport since 1979. Over the years it has used some 17 minibuses.

Today it operates a fleet of 6 minibuses, four of which are fully accessible. It is a member of the Community Transport Association and delivers the MiDAS training scheme (Minibus Driver Awareness), and associated PATS (Passenger Assistant Training). It employs 65 staff, and has a team directly working and volunteering in transport activity of eight. Within the Transport section it delivers part of the Hospital Visiting Service, internal contracts for older peoples daycare, along with hire for local voluntary and community organisations. Turnover in the section is in the region of £65,000 per year. The Transport section carries over 10,000 passengers a year, and undertakes some 19,000 miles per year (latest figures available).

ISSUES

SUPPORT

CCH receives no public sector/strategic commitment to services as they receive no direct public funding. There has been success in grant funds for capital vehicle replacement (2008, and 2011) but this is increasingly difficult to attain. As an operator we feel very disconnected to the broader developments of transport, especially for older and frailer members of the community.

Some services in the City have direct funding from SPT and/or Community Planning due to largely historical reasons, but there is no clear funder we could approach to develop innovative services or to assist in vehicle replacement. Transport Scotland Bus Service Operators Grant is the only revenue support to the service, as in the region of £2,000 per year. We are a delivery partner in the SPT Hospital Visiting Service, but this is effectively payment for service, with no grant element.

Within Glasgow there is some small grant support given to voluntary and community organisations for trips and outings, but these often do not factor in the opportunity to further support the sector and encourage sustainability. Rather than small sums of funding for trips, which largely go to private operators, a more creative solution, with larger social return on investment with public funding could be achieved if the groups received vouchers,
awarded in the same grant process, which could be redeemed from CT operators, with the funding going to ensuring a good quality sustainable community service.

STRATEGY

As the recent CCH survey shows CT is used by a significant percentage of older and disabled people, even in a well connected urban setting such as Scotland’s largest City. They are however socially isolated and most certainly isolated from engaging with the broader cultural and societal opportunities due to restrictions on their mobility. Which means they personally cannot access the public transport concession, and the freedom it can offer. For the year 2011/12 CCH had around 60% passengers disabled, and a further 10% who were over 60. Yet public bodies give little, if any consideration to the issue of travel for the frail, other than a blanket “Dial a ride” which cannot cope nor provide the choices individuals need. The agencies also do not account for the contribution which CT operators could make to improving the ease of access and effectiveness of their services.

CCH is a delivery partner in the Hospital Visiting Scheme, which operates across Glasgow, taking vulnerable visitors into see relatives and friends across the Hospital network in weekday evenings. We endorse this approach to using the collective benefit in safe, local, trusted transport for predominately older travellers who would otherwise not be able to attend to sick and unwell hospitalised relatives. This scheme shows what the CT network can offer to the NHS, and how CT operators can work together to deliver across even a City setting. CCH has been part of this since 2008.

The centralisation of planning, via one of the agencies such as Transport Scotland, or the regional/area partnerships such as Strathclyde Passenger Transport would not necessarily assist the development or sustainability of the sector. SPT has been instrumental in the development of the Hospital Visiting Service and in the newly formed West of Scotland Community Transport Network, but as an agency has given CCH no support, development or financial since the service was established, despite being the third-largest CT operator in Glasgow.

DRIVERS

As an independent CT operator we are very concerned over the situation about the availability of drivers (both paid and volunteers) who have a D1 category on their driving licence. People who passed their car driving test prior to 1st January 1997 automatically have entitlement to drive a minibus as they have Category D1 on their licence. People who passed after this date do not have D1 on their licence and so are required to sit a separate test in order to drive a minibus (with some complicated concessions for volunteers). This means that today nobody under 34 years of age can drive a minibus until they pass their D1 test. Few people are willing to incur the costs of achieving D1 which are in the order of £1000, and so this is likely to grow as a major
stumbling block for drivers as time goes by. We do not have the resources to support individuals to undertake these additional tests, and this is potentially very discriminatory for many CT operators who wish also to create local employment opportunities in their local community. We know of several candidates who would be excellent employees and ambassadors for the CT sector, but are not able to either volunteer or work due to this high barrier to entry. We understand the need to ensure trained drivers, which is why we subscribe to the MiDAS (Minibus Drivers Awareness Scheme) and provide regular training for our driving team, but this is an artificial division which does not add anything to the quality of driving.

VEHICLE REPLACEMENT

Whilst we have been successful in vehicle replacement, two of our current fleet of six has been funded, we have had to find from our reserves cash to finance the other vehicles. This has meant we have had to seek second-hand vehicles to operate, which not only have a shorter working life, but also are not so efficient and can bring mechanical problems and costs. We fear in the current financial climate that as a voluntary organisation that the funds will simply not be there in 2016 to replace our oldest elements of the fleet, which are used daily, creating a crisis in the delivery of services. Before the current round of replacement our vehicles had been operational for around 11 years, far, far beyond what they were designed for, and beyond a reasonable economic working life. This situation is common to many CT operators throughout the country and it is not uncommon to find a CT vehicle much older and with higher mileage than in the private sector. As a sector we simply do not have access to the capital directly or the security of income to seek lease or finance to support the cost of new vehicles, which are specialist and often cost in excess of £50,000.

CONCESSION CARD SCHEME

Though many users of community transport have a bus concession card, this cannot be used on the vast majority of services. It seems reasonable that where community transport passengers pay single fares they should be able to use their concession. This would help the concession scheme achieve its social objectives particularly as community transport users arguably have a greater need for the concession than others, as the below survey demonstrates.

One issue for CT operators however is the reimbursement rate which will reduce to 60% in 2013. As most community transport operators are small with little prospect of achieving significant economies of scale, it would be very difficult for them to absorb the 40% differential in the same way as large commercial bus operators. Participation in the scheme, if it were to be extended more widely to community transport services, would only make sense to operators if they were able to have the full fare reimbursed.
CCH in a very recent survey of our older service users, who use Older Peoples Daycare found that the majority do not access public transport (57%) and when the older age group of over 75 years of age is considered this rises to 80%. There is effectively little independent travel, and for the minority who do this is with carers (72% of those who used public transport did so with a carer). The minority of service users who do travel tended to do so weekly, but largely within the confines of “local” travel. None of the service users questioned used the concession to travel within the Strathclyde region or nationally – unlike the profile of those who do access the concessionary travel, and limiting the access to cultural and general engagement with the opportunities in Scottish society.

If the Scottish Government enabled the Community Transport sector to access the funding for the concessionary travel, and the evidence above is that the very vulnerable are actually not accessing this resource as was intended in it’s current form, whereas CT operators show strong evidence of providing travel options for the most disadvantaged, most isolated and most disabled in our society, not only would this help make the sector more sustainable, it would widen social engagement for the most vulnerable.

Community Central Hall
17 April 2013