COMMUNITY TRANSPORT INQUIRY
CONNECT ASSYNT
WRITTEN SUBMISSION

“Connect Assynt” became a fully formed entity in 2010, formalising “Assynt Community Transport”, a small group of volunteers in Assynt, west Sutherland. This was expedited following the withdrawal of the Highland Council from the provision of day-care services to the elderly in and around Lochinver, the main village in the parish. At the time, the award-winning programme O4O (older people for older people), a project to address problems of remoteness and isolation, was in process. O4O investigated ways to enable older people to live happily and healthily in their homes and communities, as well as making a strong contribution to community life. Its aim was to set up projects by which more mature adults would form a framework within their community to support others to stay independent and at the very least in their own homes, well into their sunset years. This is particularly suited to the parish of Assynt, as, due to the disproportionate emphasis on tourism, younger generations are forced to move away to look for full-time work.

Among others, one object was primarily to save the Day Centre and the minibus for the elderly and, building on this, return the centre to its original community purpose, including the provision of community transport across the parish, stretching from Elphin in the east and Kylesku in the north to Inverkirkaig, in the south. Assynt has rightfully gained a reputation for community ownership (famously “The Assynt Crofters” estate buy-out) and this was seen as a further opportunity to aid local sustainability. As in other peripheral provinces in Europe, the population was, and continues to be, in severe decline, perhaps due to the lack of commerce, and the age range is heavily weighted towards the over sixties, many seeking a quiet retirement in idyllic surroundings and away from the negative effects of e.g., traffic jams. The inevitable results of an aging population in a remote area, and the inherent financial burdens, are well known to the NHS and Social Services and the transport group was initially formed to mitigate these circumstances. The Day Centre and attached community bus service had been taken over by the Highland Council previously, after being set up as a community-run charity. In the past, respite beds were also available, as well as many all age activities, but these, along with the scope of the community bus, had been severely reduced under the Council as part of their budget reduction programme. The perception then grew that the centre and the bus (equipped as it is with a wheelchair lift) was confined to the use of the very aged and infirm.

To cut a long story short, a board of volunteers, led by a local doctor, set up “Community Care Assynt”, which took over the centre and facilitated the separate group, Connect Assynt, a company limited by guarantee. Arduous negotiations with the council afforded a service level agreement for CCA and the community purchase of the minibus. The council, enabled by LEADER
funding, provided free training for drivers, and a group of local volunteers came forward to train in this way, and also to assist within the day centre, manned by an enthusiastic team of manager and part-time staff.

Currently, the primary functions have been achieved and the day centre is open on every weekday to provide a lunch club, laundry, hairdresser etc. as well as social activities for the elderly; younger folk with learning difficulties also serve as volunteers. The bus, driven only by volunteers, is contracted to bring clients in from the outlying districts and co-ordination is afforded by the staff and volunteers in the centre. Original plans to employ a part-time transport co-ordinator and development officer failed to materialise after funding applications foundered. Our ability to serve further is perforce limited.

Current challenges in Connect Assynt:

- Raising funds for a replacement vehicle
- Difficulty retaining volunteer drivers, due to population demographics
- Due to pigeon-holing of minibus to use by Assynt Centre clients, marketing is much compromised. Younger people and groups assume its use is denied them and many retirees do not wish to be associated with concepts of aging and dependence.
- Inherent inability to proceed with a larger vision.
- Some funders only give grants to “Charities” i.e., regulated by OSCR.
- Volunteers’ time to communicate with prospective clients to learn of their needs, is limited.
- Lack of a web-site or the facility to join a national transport web-site. There appears to be no mention of demand-led transport on the otherwise excellent “traveinescotland” web-site.
- Lack of IT capability to design software capable of co-ordinating transport or knowledge of any available
- Lack of business support

Future aims:

- To integrate with other local transport providers, private or “community”, reducing redundancies, e.g. Dead miles, excess mileage and empty seats.
- To employ a co-ordinator or volunteer integration system, involving computer training and increasing community capacity, also assessing and prioritising needs.
- Building links with the NHS, Scottish Ambulance, medical services, social services and learning providers, to optimise use and minimise expense.
• Increase local opportunities for volunteer training and disclosure by using the learning centre, local TSI and council help.
• The establishment of section 22 connective bus routes, the re-establishment of the link to the railway station in Lairg and gain access to public travel concession funding
• To engage with representatives from local clubs and social groups to assess needs, promote further volunteer drivers and provide hires.
• To employ one or more part-time or full-time drivers.

Further notional aspirations:

• Set up a core of volunteer drivers with their own vehicles to address areas of under-provision, individual appointments and the like.
• Engage with clients to encourage creative ideas and responses to promote further social activities recruiting additional demographic sectors.
• Integrate with larger public transport companies to promote bus transport onward from Assynt.
• Establish a wide-ranging local transport information system, utilising website, blog, Facebook, newsletter, email alerts sign-up etc.
• To link to the current Lochinver Lift-share page on Facebook
• Encourage local producers to use local transport to convey produce to local shops, restaurants, school, day centre etc.

Jane Young (Acting Chairman)
Connect Assynt
19 April 2013

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1 A project led by the Centre for Rural Health, a research unit involving the University of the Highlands and Islands and the University of Aberdeen, which looked at the role of older people in rural life in Scotland, Sweden, Finland, Greenland and Northern Ireland, and helped to devise community support schemes. The Older People for Older People (O4O) project won the RegioStars 2012 Award in the category "Inclusive Growth: Strategies, initiatives or projects addressing the challenge of demographic change and supporting active ageing". The award distinguishes original and innovative projects which could be attractive and inspiring to other European regions.