VOLUNTEER DRIVERS

The contribution of volunteer drivers has been crucial to the success of Community Transport in Scotland. From the beginning volunteers have constituted the majority of drivers – very many of them being of retirement age - a factor which gives them both available time and an inclination to make a contribution to the communities in which they live. From the point of view of those communities which have purchased a vehicle and provide services – generally to areas which public transport has not or cannot reach, the time and energy offered by volunteers makes possible that which would otherwise not be so.

The passengers find that the driver is someone known to them and this familiarity transforms what generally amounts to a rather uninteresting means of getting from A to B into something of a social occasion or (and especially for those living on their own) a chance of social contact and conversation. The Community minibus is an important cohesive factor, especially in rural areas. The bowling club, the youth football team, the quilting club, the arts association and many other groups are enabled to pursue their common interests together.... in a manner in which four or five motor cars will never be able to replicate.

Prior to 01 January 1997, all motorists passing the driving test for cars (Category B) automatically acquired Category D1 – (minibuses) - and this was evidenced by a D1 entitlement on the licence. After that date all new drivers, ie those passing the basic (B) car test and wishing to drive minibuses will need to have passed a further test for D1 UNLESS all of the following conditions are met:

- Aged 21 or over
- The driver has held a full B licence for a minimum of two years
- The driver receives no remuneration other than out-of-pocket expenses.
- The vehicle weighs no more than 3500kgs (or 4250kgs if fitted with specialised equipment intended for the carriage of disabled passengers.)

Compliance with the exemption conditions above will constitute a major problem especially for the small rural operator - typically with one minibus. The configuration of that minibus will usually be of sixteen seats and will commonly be fitted with a hydraulic wheelchair lift. The minibus will be converted from a VW, Mercedes or Iveco commercial vehicle and will have a gross weight approaching 5000KGS. [Sixteen seats is the capacity which current legislation identifies as the maximum for a “minibus”. It is also
the ideal number for the carriage of the village football team or primary school class and the needs of many other users of Community Transport.] Some manufacturers do offer vehicles at 3500 kgs but these bring severe restrictions on seating capacity.

The above constitutes a crisis, especially for the small Community Transport organisation. Volunteers are still willing to give of their time but reluctant to submit to a further DSA test. The cost of the D1 training and test, at a minimum of £1300 per driver, is impossible for the small operator to finance out of operating surpluses.

Analysis of the cost of the D1 training and test reveals that, of the above total, approximately (and dependent on the time required) some £950 is required to remunerate a (commercially employed) person acting as ‘supervisor’ of the D1 learner. There are alternatives: Community Transport has capable individuals currently training drivers to the MiDAS (Minibus Driver Assessment and Training Scheme) standard but current legislation requires them, before moving to D1 training, to themselves undertake the D1 test. The same legislation then requires the successful trainer to pause for a period of THREE YEARS before undertaking a ‘supervision’ role without, it would appear, laying down any rules in connection with minibus driving with which the individual must comply during the three years. Three years is a long period for a potentially dedicated ‘supervisor’ to kick his/her heels and for a Community Transport organisation to see any return on their investment.

Community Transport operators fully accept that, unless manufacturers come up with a 3500 KGS minibus with comfortable seating capacity for sixteen passengers, the ‘D1 by test’ driver training regime is the appropriate one. However there are certain modifications and cost savings which would be beneficial:

1. The three year ‘void’ imposed upon ‘supervisors’ qualified by having passed D1 by test should be reassessed in order to enable Community Transport operators to use their own (volunteer) ‘supervisors’ as soon as possible thus minimising the costs associated with commercial supervision.
2. The process of training and test inevitably consumes considerable on-road minibus time. Community Transport minibuses operated under the Permit system do not require tachographs to be fitted as part of their normal operation, but the legislation dictating conditions for the D1 by test stipulate that “all vehicles presented for test must be fitted with a fully working tachograph.” A tachograph adds over £500 to the cost of a minibus at the time of manufacture and considerably more as a retrofit. This would be an additional imposition on the Community Transport operator wishing to minimise the cost of driver training by means of the use of his own vehicle for the D1 test. (Potential savings of £75 per candidate)
3. On account largely of training cost implications and, for the older driver, the inevitable conclusion to a period of volunteer driving -
complete and final retirement – a specific, ring fenced fund is required in order to remedy the crisis in driver numbers.

Dumfries and Galloway Accessible Transport Forum
18 April 2013