Call for Views

Dumfries & Galloway Council services a large predominantly rural area, and is the second least densely populated mainland Scottish local authority. As such, much of our population has difficulty in accessing transport facilities as easily or as cheaply as those living in more urban areas.

For older, younger and less able people in particular, therefore, Community Transport (CT) organisations can provide an invaluable service to supplement mainstream public transport provision.

Our Council has provided significant resources to CT groups in the last decade, but it recognises the need to ensure that resources are targeted at areas of most need, and to seek to encourage greater sustainability of all community groups in the future.

Community Transport – Do We Need a More Strategic Approach?

A number of active community transport organisations exist and operate in the region. However, short, medium and long term sustainability for these groups is a major concern as they are all, to some extent, reliant on grant funding. Such funding is becoming harder to find and access as public finances reduce.

Community transport groups can also access funding from sources other than local authorities, primarily to assist with the acquisition of vehicles. There are different levels of activity amongst groups, which are primarily focused on specific local areas, and in some cases groups of service users. This can lead to some groups’ assets being under-utilised, whilst others’ assets and (for example volunteer / staff) resources come under pressure.

Co-ordinating facilities need to be established to ensure that available resources are most effectively directed to areas of need.

Promotion of sustainable transport across our region is a key commitment within our Council’s Priorities.

Within Dumfries & Galloway, the Council intends to implement a Strategic Commission for the delivery of Community Transport from 1 April 2014. This will set the quality standards, operational requirements and framework under which grant and / or revenue funding will be distributed to organisations. It is also anticipated that it will define the requirements for
an overarching co-ordinating body to better direct operational resources to demand.

The South West of Scotland Transport Partnership (SWestrans) reviewed its local bus service provision in 2012, with priority being given, in descending order, to access to: work, education, health, retail, transport links and personal activity.

It is recognised that community transport groups can supplement some of the gaps in service at the lower end of these criteria; however, even at the higher priority levels, for more sparsely populated areas it might be anticipated that groups which have benefited from public sector funding would have a role to play in accessing essential services.

**Demand**

There is a continuing demand for access to community transport across Dumfries & Galloway, especially in the more rural communities where there is no commercial local bus service provision, and where cost pressures have mitigated against extension of subsidised services to provide regular services other than at peak times.

Dumfries & Galloway has 30.6% of its population aged 60 or over as opposed to the Scottish average of 23.3% (2011 Census). Life expectancy in Dumfries & Galloway is greater than the Scottish average. The proportion of population aged over 75 in Dumfries & Galloway is projected to increase by just under 50% between 2010 and 2035. There is likely to be increasing demand for assistance with transport needs.

Community transport is not just a service for older people, however. Younger people increasingly need to travel to access services, leisure facilities and opportunities for socialising. Disabled individuals and groups are also frequent users of community transport, given the financial pressures on the provision of public transport services.

Within the Dumfries & Galloway Community Survey 2011, 84% of respondents stated that they “felt strongly” about transport as an issue.

**Do your local NHS bodies work closely with community transport providers?**

Whilst there is regular liaison between NHS Dumfries & Galloway, Scottish Ambulance Service and the Dumfries & Galloway Accessible Transport Forum (a body to which most local community transport groups are affiliated), it is recognised that community transport groups have the potential to provide greater levels of assistance and service to patients attending hospital appointments. Such assistance will require effective communication and coordination to ensure that there is a common understanding of the respective requirements and resource constraints.
How do you access non-emergency patient transport? How can community transport systems be improved?

See the description of the Rural Transport Solutions project below.

Has your community transport group experienced funding difficulties?

From the perspective of a funder, rather than a provider, of community transport facilities, Dumfries & Galloway Council is conscious that there is a reduced level of funding available to grant-seeking bodies across all areas of activity.

Community transport groups are no exception, and our Council has been seeking to ensure that such groups take a more enterprising approach to income generation (see description of Rural Transport Solutions project below). Whilst we recognise that some individuals or groups utilising community transport will benefit from free or subsidised services, CT providers can help to make such provision more sustainable by, for example, providing services to local authority departments or health boards on a commercial basis, or by operating local bus services.

Do you think that Community Transport should fall within concessionary fare schemes?

Where CT groups operate local bus services under a Section 22 Permit, they are currently able to operate within the concessionary fares scheme. Extending eligibility for the scheme to non-scheduled Community Transport journeys would enable a greater number of people to benefit from free transport on a greater number of occasions. However, it has to be recognised that the cost of such an extension may not be achievable within finite resources.

The demand to include CT within the current scheme does not provide any estimate of the cost of inclusion, nor of the cost-impact of an increase in demand through enabling those entitled to the concession to access it through CT providers. The demand that the scheme should fund 100% of the cost of CT travel increases the risk that there would be an uncontrolled expansion of provision.

There would also be a risk of creating an uneven playing field, given the relatively greater rigour of the licensing and inspection regime applying to those operating under Section 22.

There may be significant potential for duplicating provision of current scheduled local services, potentially further eroding the sustainability of these, with negative impacts on those within local communities who do not have access to the concessionary fares scheme.

In our view, the costs of the type of personalised and group-focused service substantially provided by CT groups should be met by a combination of charges to those individuals or groups and the CT groups themselves. CT groups can generate income through provision of
services. Funding bodies should seek to direct grant and/or revenue funding towards CT groups on the basis of services provided rather than funding assets or core costs.

**Specific Discussion re Dumfries & Galloway**

Residents of Dumfries and Galloway, particularly those in the rural or remote rural areas of the region encounter difficulties in accessing centralised local facilities. These difficulties can be alleviated through the delivery of appropriate transport links at the appropriate times.

Community transport is considered to be a significant and vital element of this delivery particularly in the medium term as the age demographic for the region continues to rise.

A number of active community transport organisations exist and operate in the region. However, short, medium and long term sustainability for these groups is a major concern as they are all, to some extent, reliant on grant funding. Such funding is becoming harder to find and access as public finances reduce.

Organisation status, management, co-ordination, capital purchase, licensing, maintenance and the availability of suitable drivers (volunteer or paid) are all daily issues for community transport organisations.

**Improvements**

Community transport is seen as a vital delivery mechanism for meeting the growing transport needs across the region. To achieve this, the above issues have to be addressed and the following actions are currently being developed:

- **Strategic approach** – A Strategic Commission for the delivery of Community Transport will be operational from 1 April 2014. This will set the quality standards, operational requirements and framework under which grant and revenue funding will be distributed to organisations.

- **Procurement** – Community planning partners (Council, NHS, RTP and SAS) will continue to work in partnership as commissioners of social and health care transport to identify and promote opportunities for community transport organisations to tender for service delivery. This will provide an income stream for organisations and assist with sustainability (note the information provided on the Rural Transport Solutions project below).

- **Shared Services** – It is intended to adopt and implement the Rural Transport Solutions model in partnership with East Ayrshire Council to facilitate more resource sharing, including staff and vehicles, across the public and voluntary sectors. The aims are to secure
efficiency gains, both operational and financial, within existing transport provision, including high care transport by integrating managed and co-ordinated delivery of community transport groups across regional boundaries.

**Rural Transport Solutions – Dumfries and Galloway**

The Rural Transport Solutions (RTS) project was initiated in Dumfries and Galloway with the main aim to develop an innovative and sustainable service delivery model to reduce social exclusion and enhance the sustainability of transport provision in sparsely populated areas.

A pilot in Wigtownshire was launched in May 2011 and implemented a vehicle sharing model between the Council and the Community Transport provider, Wigtownshire Community Transport (WCT). The objective of the pilot was to improve efficiency and stabilise costs associated with transport provision particularly for health and social care journeys. It was identified that Council owned/operated vehicles had significant downtime and would be better utilised if they could be shared and co-ordinated with existing third sector provision.

WCT, based in Stranraer, was an established third sector provider with all necessary provisions in place including a local office, staff and equipment to deliver transport services on behalf of the local commissioners (Council, SWestrans, NHS and Scottish Ambulance Service).

They had suitably qualified drivers/escorts, and computerised booking and scheduling package which met the project needs and data protection requirements of commissioning organisations.

The Council’s insurers agreed to insure WCT to allow unrestricted access to three 16-seater low-floor vehicles used primarily for school transport.

The initial phase of the pilot identified an opportunity to provide more efficient transport for service users attending the Social Work managed Activity & Resource Centre (ARC). WCT worked closely with management, users, parents and carers to schedule and deliver transport for using Council vehicles with the intention to ensure all service users were at the ARC for 09:00 and to allow a full day of activity up to 16:00.

The vehicles used for ARC transport are then available to WCT for school transport, health care transport, local community groups, sports groups and Day Centres – rather than sitting idle during the day, evenings and weekends.
The pilot has seen vehicle utilisation improve significantly from 20% to 67%. All the day to day transport issues have been removed from ARC management and costs savings of approximately 30% have been achieved. The service users have an improved access and quality service.

The Council is intending to implement this model across the region.

Dumfries & Galloway Council and SWestrans
23 April 2013