COMMUNITY TRANSPORT INQUIRY

LOCHABER ACTION ON DISABILITY - FORT WILLIAM

WRITTEN SUBMISSION

Lochaber Action on Disability is a charity formed in the 1990s to help people in the community who are elderly and disabled. We did not set out with the aim of running transport but it soon became apparent that access to our activities could only be achieved if we could provide transport. At the time there were no wheelchair accessible vehicles available and we were lucky to have one donated to us.

We now have two wheelchair accessible minibuses that are used virtually non stop every week between Monday and Friday.

Your request for responses included a set of questions our response to these questions is as follows:

- A lack of a strategic approach to community transport and the impact which a lack of transport has on people’s lives

Lack of transport can have a devastating effect on people’s lives. Unfortunately we have a culture in the transport industry that does not understand the needs of the elderly and disabled. There is an expectation that provision of a bus service solves the problem but if the individual cannot walk to or from the bus stop then the bus service does not serve their needs.

Over the years community transport has been included in the strategic approach to transport provision but very much as a quaint little group of volunteers who are wonderful at filling gaps in provision at little or no cost.

The attitude has been very similar from Health and Social care as although we have a Service Level Agreement for our services for disabled adults we have great difficulty in getting them to commit to more than one years agreement and they are constantly asking us to cut costs with no regard being made to inflationary increases.

We feel that for a strategic approach to work it would have to be implemented at a very high government level encompassing Third Sector, Health and Transport. Ideally we would like to see the Third Sector Division lead on this as they work with an Third Sector interface within every local authority. The interface should be given teeth to implement the strategy within Community planning.

In order for us to have a brighter future and cope with the demand we are faced with we have to have a move away from public agencies being unwilling to work together and share budgets. They have to make it easier for Third/voluntary sector organisations to focus on the good work they do rather than continually applying for funding and often being refused because they do not fit certain criteria.
The growing demand for community transport provision

There are various reasons why demand for our transport services is increasing.

1) Social work/NHS Highland have withdrawn transport for young people attending day care. The alternatives offered were for their carers to enter into very expensive contracts with taxi firms. The cost the carer was expected to pay far outstripped the amount being received in Disability Living Allowance and Mobility Allowance. We had extremely distressed people coming to us asking if we could help. We have been able to do so at a lower cost than taxi provision but we can only continue to do so by our volunteers raising funds to continue our transport service operating.

2) Our local lunch club was told that they would close because it was no longer Social work policy to run lunch clubs. They felt that communities should be running these for themselves. We eventually stepped in and took over the lunch club as we also run a local community café. When Social Work ran the lunch club they also provided transport. This was withdrawn when the lunch club closed. Fortunately we were in a position to register a dial a bus route to cater for this need. We receive no funding for this and are having to run it sustainably through the fares we charge. Most of the passengers are entitled to free travel and we therefore rely on reimbursement from Transport Scotland. Unfortunately the budget has been capped over the last 2 years and we have been faced with a substantial reduction in our reimbursement in the final period in both financial years 2011/12 and 2012/13.

3) We have been encouraged to tender for services and have been accepted on to a Framework contract by Highland Council. We feel we were misled when tendering for this work as we had previously been undertaking sporadic pieces of work for social work when they required to get someone in to respite care for example. We thought that the Framework contract would ensure we were paid for the work but we have now been stung 3 times when having done the work and sent in our invoice we have been told that we should have asked the client to pay. The people we were being asked to carry were vulnerable and did not have carers with them or money to pay.

- A lack of a coordinated approach with NHS bodies and community transport providers

In Highland the NHS refuse to accept that they are responsible for providing transport. They will not enter in to discussion and say they do not have a transport budget.

We have been involved in the ground work for a pilot integrated transport project in our area but the NHS approach does not seem to include them being forthcoming with funding.

- Eligibility criteria for non-emergency patient transport and the cost to NHS of taxi use
This is becoming a major issue, we are getting more and more requests from people who have been refused transport by non-emergency patient transport. Although we would like to help the patient would have to pay a hefty charge for us to take them to Raigmore and in any case we really do not have the capacity to do this on a regular basis. The integrated transport project may address this.

Contrary to what Scottish Ambulance (SAS) say they have spare capacity on the vehicles travelling to and from Inverness. If the money they receive for running non-emergency patient transport could be removed from them and added to all the other pots of money used to subsidise transport we feel a much more robust solution could be found. SAS do not seem to have to justify the money they are given, they do not have to tender against others for the work. Could withdrawal of the money they receive be considered and allocated to a body at local level who could use it to introduce a service that is available to everyone?

- Replacing community transport vehicles and funding planning

We have been lucky but have to constantly look for possible funding sources to replace our vehicles. We try to set our fares a level that allows us to save for replacement but when we don’t receive full reimbursement from the concessionary fares scheme we have eat in to our savings to cover the costs of running our services.

- Access to concessionary fares schemes

We currently run 2 registered bus services using our S22 bus permits. As mentioned above we do not receive 100% back for allowing the elderly and disabled to travel for free.

On the services we operate with S19 permits we ask for contributions from the passenger. Some are generous others find it hard to pay. If S19 services could be included in the concessionary fares scheme this would help us be more sustainable and enable us to provide the service our community needs.

We also have major problems with being part of the concessionary fare scheme because we have to have a ticket machine. There have been numerous problems with the machine. We have had periods where it hasn’t uploaded information to the Back Office in Inverness. On one occasion we had to drive to Inverness (65 miles away) for this to be achieved. Because our information had not been uploaded Transport Scotland asked if we had withdrawn our service and were surprised that we were using the Local Authority Back office but it would costs several thousand pounds to run our own back office. The system is skewed against community transport being included in the scheme.

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