Lochaber Transport Forum was set up in 1999 with a grant from the Rural Community Transport Initiative and support from the local authority, Highland Council. The Forum aims include gathering together individuals and agencies interested in the co-ordination, development and improvement of public and community transport.

The Forum:
- encourages and promotes the growth of all modes of transport to, from and within the Lochaber area.
- has achieved more integrated working amongst transport providers.
- provides an opportunity for people to meet to raise and iron out problems.

The Forum offers support to the many diverse groups and projects who provide community transport in Lochaber. CT in Lochaber is made up of a very large community car scheme, several village minibuses in rural areas and Shopmobility who operate mainly in Fort William with outreach services. Several care homes feel there is a need to run their own transport because of recent cutbacks to suitable public and local authority services.

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

It has long been accepted that community transport is made up of small dedicated groups doing what they can within their own area. It largely depends on the will power, ability and time of local people. Many of Lochaber’s projects are run completely by volunteers or with an employee working a few hours a week. A lot of time is spent looking for funding, sending reports when successful and following strict guidelines/regulations when working with the public and operating vehicles.

There is now more encouragement to become social enterprises which may mean finding other unrelated work to help pay for their original projects. This can add to the workload and may detract from the initial aims of the group.

A lack of strategic approach means some areas have and some have not. It’s down to the willingness of an area as to what community services they have. If this enthusiasm, for whatever reason, is not present in a village then they will be lacking in community services. There are areas with higher needs than others because of this so more planning/support is required.
2 The growing demand for community transport provision.
Our community car scheme was set up in 2000 because even then the most discussed need among community groups/organisations was the lack of transport for health and social purposes. This is still very current with a steady increase in need which has speeded up over the last several years. As transport services provided by the NHS and local authority are reduced or removed community transport is the only option available.

The Transport Forum are currently carrying out a survey/questionnaire for one area to see what appropriate transport can be provided. They have been left with very little and largely unsuitable provision since new services took effect over 12 months ago.

Lochaber Action on Disability took over the running of a busy lunch club when Highland Council decided they couldn’t continue to provide the service. The group run the club five days a week and accessed another minibus to provide transport for many of the members who could not otherwise attend.

As these groups have been established for many years they have a number of passengers who have been with them for a long time. As they get older more support is required and staff/volunteers are happy to help, e.g. to phone ahead of appointments to ensure they are ready.

As the need for minibuses increase finding drivers is a problem which can only escalate. Since D1 was not automatically given to drivers when passing their test there are less drivers available. This is now increasing as older drivers retire and no one trained to replace them. Finding a way around these restrictions and simplifying the process of sitting a test to drive a minibus is becoming urgent.

3 A lack of a coordinated approach with NHS bodies and community transport providers
Some of our community transport providers have a good working relationship with local NHS departments. At other levels this is not so apparent. Groups can get called at short notice to help with early discharge from hospital or when patient transport is not available. Patients who get urgent or emergency transport into hospital usually have to make their own arrangements to get home.

There is also difficulty when travelling outwith Lochaber to Raigmore Hospital, Inverness. Patients who are not eligible for patient transport or without their own transport have great difficulty accessing suitable transport. On occasions when this is just possible it requires linking two or three services. When patients do meet SAS criteria journeys from West Lochaber to Inverness can’t always be completed in a day by ambulance. Patients then have to look for help with part or all of the trip which can lead to appointments being cancelled.
4 Eligibility criteria for non-emergency patient transport provision
Several groups have seen a rise in requests for transport to non-emergency hospital appointments. Some cannot help due to funding which doesn’t cover trips seen to be the responsibility of the NHS. When help can be given it poses a dilemma that passengers will continue to ask to use a service they are familiar and comfortable with.

Lochaber Transport Forum have initiated several meetings with SAS, NHS and community transport providers dating back to 2001. The same problems and discussions were raised but no solution/compromise could be found.

A very recent development in Lochaber is the Integrated Transport Project. This aims to increase collaborative working to deliver effective transport services. The Highland Council, NHS Highland, The Scottish Ambulance Service and Highland and Islands Transport Partnership are all represented on the Project Board. Work is on going with a possible start date of June/July. This is a pilot project until early 2014 with a view to making it Highland wide in the future.

This is seen as a very positive step by local groups but will take time to become fully beneficial.

5 Replacing community transport vehicles and funding planning
Replacing vehicles is a constant concern for groups who operate them. Funding is more difficult to find for capital costs. As work increases and vehicles do more this requires more maintenance charges, etc. Groups find it very difficult to cover depreciation costs each year to purchase new vehicles when needed.

Several groups in the area are supported by the Highland Council Rural Community Transport Grant but are having to find extra funding to make ends meet. This is replicated throughout the country and has led to funding trusts/bodies being continually oversubscribed for the grants they have available. One trust reported they could only fund 25 applications from a total of 75 for their quarterly grant allocation.

Short term funding doesn’t allow projects to do their work in a sustainable and effective manner. This needs to be extended to three/five years so staff/volunteers have confidence in planning for the future.

6 Access to concessionary fare schemes
The Transport Forum supports the Age Scotland Campaign to increase the use of The Concessionary Fare Scheme to community transport. There is a very clear problem when the people who need it most cannot use it. Our community car scheme supports 300 clients throughout a year and has to charge fares to all including many who are card holders. While everyone is very grateful for a door to door service for appointments and attending social events they have to pay extra because of ill health or a disability.
There is also a much larger problem because the concessionary fare budget is capped which results in a shortfall at the end of each year. Some groups have regular trips which they have now registered under section 22 services to help make them more viable. They were completely unaware of the problems which arose when they didn’t receive any payment for the last month. Small groups do not have sufficient reserves to withstand this and each year gets more difficult. It’s been reported that the reimbursement rate is to be reduced further but it’s very clear community groups need full cost recovery of costs to continue.

Lochaber Transport Forum
18 April 2013