COMMUNITY TRANSPORT INQUIRY

MOBILITY AND ACCESS COMMITTEE FOR SCOTLAND (MACS)

WRITTEN SUBMISSION

The Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland (MACS) believes in a Scotland where anyone with a mobility problem due to some physical, mental or sensory impairment can go where and when everyone else can and has the information and opportunity to do so. Amongst other responsibilities MACS exists to provide advice to Scottish Ministers advice on aspects of policy affecting the travel needs of disabled people.

One of the three strategic outcomes of the national transport strategy is to “Improve quality, accessibility and affordability of transport, to give people the choice of public transport and real alternatives to the car”

In the absence of the ability to own or drive a car people with disabilities are entirely dependent on either the good will of others, conventional public transport, taxi or some form of community transport.

In some parts of Scotland, not just the more remote rural areas there are now no conventional public bus services, while in most others there are not yet fully accessible vehicles for those with mobility difficulties. For many people however the requirement is for door-to-door transport. Here there are further obstacles to travel in the complete absence of accessible taxis outside some of the major urban areas in Scotland and the patchy coverage between authorities of taxi-card schemes. For many people and in the absence of the above the only feasible form of transport would be an accessible community transport vehicle providing a basic link to services. This is reflected in the use of such services as exist which is now predominantly by older and disabled people. As such the provision of community transport is directly linked to health and social care issues and should be seen as such by the relevant agencies rather than treated solely as a transport issue.

Loss of a transport service is sometimes the tipping point which leads to a loss of quality of life for people with mobility difficulties and leads ultimately to preventing them from living independent lives in their own homes and forces them into having to go into residential care. This reduces their quality of life and increases the demand upon public expenditure. Without transport some people cannot access the most basic of services such as shops to buy food or GP surgeries to attend to their health needs. This is the type of scenario where community transport can play a vital role and does so in some parts of Scotland.

The third sector provides at least 2.6 million passenger journeys each year in Scotland for people who have no public transport services or who cannot use the services that do exist. These range from small, local car schemes run entirely by volunteers to larger dial a ride services which provide door to door
services for people who are otherwise isolated. The Community Transport Association (CTA) has estimated that there are around 80 groups operating community transport that are in receipt of some form of public funding while there are up to 100 small groups entirely dependent on volunteer activity. There are services across mainland Scotland and the Isles but coverage is not comprehensive either in between or within local authority areas and reflects historical initiative, selective local authority past funding and local activism rather than a strategic assessment of need.

MACS is concerned that this lack of a strategic framework is threatening the existence of existing schemes and preventing others emerging to fill gaps in provision. The majority of existing Community Transport operations date to a period when central government provided core funding for schemes. The Transport Minister has stated in Parliament that he would encourage Councils to support such operations but as part of the Concordat funding passed to Councils with no ring-fencing. As a result there is no financial security for the sector as a whole or ability to plan beyond one financial year. This is not just an issue for ongoing revenue support but also for the replacement of vehicles, a cost that dominates financial planning for both funded and volunteer schemes. This also risks introducing a further geographical bias where wealthier communities are better able to raise funds for replacement vehicles.

MACS is concerned that the needs of the disabled and their heavy reliance such schemes is not always taken into account when funding decisions are being made and that Councils need to be aware of their obligations under the Equalities Act 2010.

The issues of a strategic approach go beyond simple availability of local finance. One of the recommendations of the Christie Commission was the greater involvement of local communities in an integrated bottom-up approach to local service provision. This would allow, for community transport, integration with NHS and Social Work transport, school mini-bus resources etc and an opportunity for a holistic look at services. In respect of NHS and social care transport Audit Scotland reviewed provision in 2011 and pointed out the fragmented approach to transport services for health and social care between Councils and NHS and called for a consideration of community transport in meeting needs. The Working Group set up by Scottish Government following the review have produced their findings but they are not yet in the public domain.

Work done as part of the Audit Scotland study suggests both from analysis and case studies that there is considerable scope for efficiency in Health and Social Care transport and the scope for efficiency is supported by work done by Strathclyde Partnership for Transport. MACS believes this could provide a platform for a longer term sustainable funding approach to such transport, especially for those people with severe mobility difficulties.

This becomes especially important with the projected demographic changes over the next 20 years. Within the 60 % forecast rise in the over-65s there will
be a major increase in the numbers of people with a disability leading to dramatic rise in the demand for accessible door-to-door services.

MACS is concerned that there is no apparent budget flexibility that recognises the costs of providing such transport can be far outweighed by the savings in keeping people in their own homes rather than in care or hospital and urges NHS and Councils to combine resources on this issue and where such services can be developed to seek to make them available for wider use.

In addition to possible funding from health and social care transport efficiencies there is an opportunity to extend concessionary travel to users of community transport. At present only a limited number of services are able to be registered as bus services with the cost and equipment issues this brings. If concessionary fares could be extended to other services or financial assistance made available for equipment etc then a far greater range of services could be considered. This would provide a core funding source for such services and allow an opportunity for communities in need of such a service to establish one. MACS is aware that this would bring cost issues for Scottish Government and understands that a recent Welsh trial scheme has been terminated. Nevertheless there is a fundamental inequality where the use of such a life-enhancing measure is denied to those whose local area is not served by conventional bus services or who are unable physically to access them.

Scottish Government no longer has a direct role in the funding of Community Transport. It has a role through custody of NHS funding in establishing the scope and opportunity for improved transport services, freeing resources both directly in efficient health and social care transport and indirectly in keeping people in their own homes and communities as long as possible. MACS would like to see a comprehensive case study that examined the scope for improved community transport in this respect. MACS would also welcome government guidance for communities wishing to establish their own scheme either directly for social care reasons or to replace withdrawn conventional services.

Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland (MACS)
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