Mull and Iona Community Trust (MICT) operates in an area of Scotland which is isolated by virtue of being an island – a situation which much of rural Scotland is also affected by. With the more positive aspects of this isolation for those who have a choice about where they live comes the negative aspect for those who are not able to travel independently.

In the current economic climate, UK and Scottish governments, local authorities and the NHS are all facing budget cuts and major re-structuring and policy changes. These all seem to have combined not to just reduce the budget for transport but in some cases to have eliminated it all together.

On the Isle of Mull this is illustrated by the fact that a superb new community hospital has just been opened. There was no apparent planned consideration of how this would be serviced by public transport provision until prompted by the community. Fortunately, it was fairly straightforward to amend the routes and timetables although it is very telling that the bus layby provided in the hospital grounds is too short for a bus.

There was mention made in the “Change Fund” to community transport but in reality this produced no real contribution in Argyll other than minor funding for networking of CT operators (a talking shop).

Much of the Isle of Mull is not serviced by public transport for the simple reason that it is not commercially viable. However, this does not help the residents who live in the sparsely populated areas of the island.

Mull is no different to all other areas of the UK in that there is an aging population. There is no transport support for elderly or infirm people living in remote areas. It is these people who typically do not have their own means of transport, either due to their health or due to the cost.

Through community development plans prepared by our local development officers it is clear that provision of community transport is a priority for the island residents. We are supporting a number of small initiatives such as car sharing, volunteer driving and in one case we managed to acquire the former BBC Balamory minibus. This latter replaced a minibus which several years ago, was withdrawn from a primary school by the local authority (budget cuts). This left the pupils with little opportunity to travel for PE, swimming lessons
and extra-curricular sports and cultural activities adding to the problems of a community already suffering from amongst the highest levels of geographic isolation in Scotland (SIMD Figures). Presumably if an assessment of the impact of this change was carried out, the implications were felt to be acceptable. The presumption would probably have been that the community would pick up the slack.

The underlying problem with all these schemes is that there is a cost which is largely un-funded and more importantly which would be unaffordable at the point of use if passed onto the service users. Otherwise, private business would be filling the need with their own buses, minibuses and taxis.

Relying on volunteers is also not really sustainable; we are familiar with the concept of “volunteer fatigue” when eventually the enthusiasm of volunteers wanes. Also, in the long run, the volunteers themselves are in many cases semi-retired and before long will themselves be seeking assistance with transport.

We are aware of a volunteer driver scheme operated by the Red Cross, which is similar to our own scheme. The problem with these is that the service users have to pay mileage expenses at 50p per mile. Given that Mull is

- sparsely populated
- Opportunities for sharing the journey are limited
- distances between settlements and the typical destinations of the ferry port, hospital or Tobermory are anything from 30 - 50 miles each way

such schemes are under-utilised because they are simply not affordable for most people who need them. (a round trip of 70 miles costing £35 is typical). MICT is seeking grant funding support for our own volunteer driver scheme to make it more affordable and therefor available to the very people it is aimed at.

MICT has supported a new singing group on Mull aimed at people living with Alzheimers, Parkinson’s Disease or strokes and we secured a small grant from the Oban, Lorne and the Isles Health and Wellbeing Network to provide free transport to the fortnightly event. A positive outcome of this project is to confirm that there is a need for such a volunteer driver system on Mull. Without this financial support the singing group would probably have folded by now. However, the funding is limited and it is quite likely that we will not be able to secure repeat funding next year. If the singing group were to fold, this would be a retrograde step meaning that the most needy are back in the position of social exclusion and isolation. We feel that investment in community transport would offset at least some of the cost associated with
providing health care to needy people by delaying the health deterioration which results from exclusion and isolation.

In terms of making use of a community owned vehicle/s, we feel that the system needs to be overhauled. The permitting requirements for section 19 and section 22 permits should be more helpful for community transport provision. Typically, we feel that a demand responsive system is required.

The permitting system is currently too restrictive, requiring
- large vehicles,
- fixed timetables and
- fixed routes.

The needs for community transport are smaller scale and more flexibility with recognition that it is not possible to cover costs without financial support – preferably through e.g. grant funding or maybe a service level agreement.

We would like to see support for social enterprises like our own to provide transport services in a cost effective manner. This support would include:
- changes to the permitting system
- financial support for capital equipment (vehicles, card readers, back office software ….etc.)
- financial support for running costs, including coordinator and driver salaries

Moray Finch
Mull and Iona Community Trust
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