COMMUNITY TRANSPORT INQUIRY
NORTH WEST COMMUNITY BUS ASSOCIATION
WRITTEN EVIDENCE

The North West Community Bus Association has been in existence over 14 years and serves the communities of Durness, Kinlochbervie and Scourie all remote villages in North West Sutherland.

As is the case in many parts of Scotland the population has a high percentage of elderly people. Although in our area they are also disadvantaged due to the lack of public transport. It was for this reason that the Association was started purchasing a 16 seater all abilities minibus to transport those who were unable to go out of their villages to amenities not provided for locally.

Over the past 14 years the Association has become a company limited by guarantee and replaced its aging minibus with a new one some 3 years ago. In 2011 a registered route was successfully granted under a Section 22 travelling from Kinlochbervie to Ullapool. This enables those with a concessionary travel card to use it on a local registered route. Since then a further route has been granted to commence on 9 April 2013 travelling to Dingwall.

As you can see the Association is trying to meet the needs of those within the communities and more emphasis is being placed on community transport organisations to meet a social need. This is all being achieved on a voluntary basis, as this is the only way that the business can be sustainable together with the grant the Association receives from Highland Council.

The main concerns that the C T inquiry should note are as follows:

- There are very few drivers under the age of 32 who have a licence to drive a minibus. The commitment to obtain a D1 by test is extremely onerous for someone who wants to drive a few hours a week as a volunteer driver. Even if all the costs were met by say the Local Authority it would still mean that the volunteer would have to give up a week of their time and this would be impossible for someone with a family or work commitments. It should also be noted that in north west Sutherland that person would have to travel to Inverness some 100 miles away and stay in accommodation. Is there a solution to this problem? Because the Association is finding it very difficult to recruit volunteer drivers for the long term and the day is going to arrive when all our present drivers will be too old to offer their services.

- As previously stated the Association is currently running 2 routes under Section 22 and the concessionary fare reimbursement. Both these routes had their fares set at 67 pence in the pound. This coming year that figure is to fall to 60 pence and in 2014 the figure will be 58.8 pence. There is also a problem with the scheme running out of money near the end of the financial year with payments not being met. If it is
the intent of the Scottish Government to really want the voluntary sector to provide these services then they must ensure that groups get the full cost recovery when they offer concessionary fares. Also it is important that 100% of the fare is reimbursed should the Age Scotland proposal be accepted.

- There has to be a change to the funding system as many of the community transport organisations are run as a business and therefore need to be able to plan for both the medium and long term. This is not achievable when funding is awarded on a yearly basis. In real terms many of the organisations are receiving less money now than they did 10 years ago. The cost of replacing a minibus has increase substantially as of a result of manufacturers having to meet EU standards and obtaining Certificates of Compliance. This will enitivally mean there will be less choice in models and pricing. Could there be a way of purchasing minibuses from a central source where bulk buying reduces the purchase price along similar lines used by companies when purchasing company vehicles? Or even a leasing scheme that could include all or some of the running costs.

Running costs are also rising with enhanced inspections and the cost of servicing these specialised vehicles. The price of fuel is a concern when living in North West Sutherland. At present the cost of a litre of diesel at our local garage is £1.54p and this is cheaper than other local garages. The Islands were treated as a special case and had their cost of fuel reduced by a few pence per litre. Is it not time to look at some of the remote mainland areas and look to treat them in the same way?

- The expectation is that volunteers come free of charge but is it not right that they should at least have all their expenses covered. These people do this work to help their communities but they should not be taken for granted as you would an employee and should be able to volunteer when it best suits them. If not they will simply refuse to help out.

- In North West Sutherland there is in operation a patient transport car that is primarily afforded to patients with a hospital need – what ever that means! As a community we had to fight tooth and nail to have this service, as Raigmore Hospital is over 100 miles away with a considerable part of the journey along single-track roads. Non-emergency patients can use this service if they meet the criteria, which is a series of questions and answers over the telephone. Should the patient require the use of the service another time they have to go through the same question and answer performance. Most of these patients are elderly and apprehensive having to go to hospital and this is heightened by the fact that they may not be eligible this time. If a patient is eligible and requires using the service again this should automatically be flagged up and approved by the person dealing with the request.
I trust that this information will be of assistance to the inquiry and that some positive outcomes are achieved to help organisations like the North West Community Bus Association.

Stuart G. McHugh
Chairman, NWCBA
12 April 2013