Orkney Disability Forum is a charity and company limited by guarantee who run services for disabled and elderly people in Orkney. Their principle service is Dial-a-bus, which is a door to door bus service for their members. We run 7 days a week from 8 am to 7 pm and later by special arrangement. The charity runs 5 vehicles, has around 500 members and carried around 14,000 passengers last year.

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

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

There has been a recognition in Orkney that there needs to be a more joined up approach to delivering community transport for years. Orkney Islands Council (OIC), NHS Orkney, Scottish ambulance and ourselves worked together and identified these problems early and formed an ‘efficient government bid’ in 2006 to address these issues. However, staff changes within OIC meant that there was little driving this forward and very little was achieved to coordinate services. Councillors did, however, press for more investigations to be done some years later and in 2007/08, the council spent I believe around £30k in consultancy work to form a plan of action to rectify the issues. We co-operated fully and spent a lot of time with the consultant to move forward the project but I am aware that there was much resistance from care homes as they felt their current vehicle provision may be put under threat. NHS Orkney had also been particularly uncooperative and when the consultant produced her report in 2008, her recommendations were largely ignored and no significant changes were made. We did benefit by provision of IT equipment and training of the Scottish Ambulances CLERIC system with the aim of coordinating all non-emergency patient transport bookings in the future. However, as we were not on either OIC or NHS Orkney property, we were not granted a licence to use the system and so the weeks training for 4 staff in Inverness proved to be a waste. We had previously advised OIC that we did not feel the booking system met our needs but as they felt that the reporting system for them would better meet their requirements, they sent us on it anyway.

Councillors persisted and again brought the progress of this into question in 2011 when Audit Scotland published ‘Transport for Health and Social Care’ and a series of meeting were set up to establish the current situation. Again, a lack of ownership was a problem with council staff eager to pass the responsibilities for the meetings onto other staff and the final meeting in February 2012 concluded that a workshop session would be required to move forward but this never happened. Also, an NHS Orkney representative only
turned up to the first of these meeting indicating that someone else would be coming to future meetings but they never did. Scottish Ambulance also failed to attend at all meetings.

- The growing demand for community transport provision

We carry around 14,000 passengers a year and have to turn down quite a lot of bookings as we are unable to accommodate with our current capacity

- Eligibility criteria for non-emergency patient transport and the cost to NHS of taxi use

We currently carry renal patient in for dialysis 3 times per week. We used to charge NHS Orkney for this but last year they shifted the responsibility of this to the patient. Therefore, the patient now has to become a member and then claims the cost of the trips from NHS Orkney. We have an arrangement with Scottish Ambulance and NHS Orkney (who are both members of our organisation) that we can carry any non-emergency patient on their request provided the booking is made by one of their staff. The uptake for this is minimal as I think only a few NHS and SAS staff know about the arrangement.

- Replacing community transport vehicles and funding planning

This is a major issue for us since the devolution of the Scottish government funding to the local authority. Orkney Islands Council has little understanding of operational issues and are often unrealistic to what can be achieved. When we were funded through the Rural Community Transport Initiative, we received around 46% of our costs. In addition to this, we had access to apply for help when we needed replacement vehicles. It was a very professional service with knowledgeable staff. The reimbursement process too was very thorough and made organisations accountable for their spending.

Now our grant funding from Orkney Islands Council only accounts for around 25% of our costs and there is no allowance for capital expenditure and so replacement vehicles have to be funded though separate means. Grant funding for buses is now very difficult to come across as projects are almost exclusively given to new and innovative projects and there are also less grants available than there used to be. We have been creative in funding our project and set up a community interest company (cic) to tap into more commercial work in order that we could generate an income for the charity. This has been very successful with the charity and the cic sharing resources and the cic buying in services from the charity. Last year, the cic bought in over £77k of bus hire, staff time and other resources from the charity and so it is now a major contributor to the charity’s income. Coupled with the shared rent and overheads, this has been a saving grace for the charity. Orkney Islands Council has failed to recognise how much we have done to turn around our dire situation and I fear our efforts may lead to an excuse to reduce our grant funding further.

Our major current issue is with our premises. We currently rent large office space and a large yard from Scottish and Southern Electricity. They have been extremely generous with a very affordable rent and free electricity.
However, they are developing into renewables and their office space in their building next door is bursting at the seams and so they have indicated that they need to reclaim our premises. We have struggled to identify affordable premises elsewhere and there has been little support from Orkney Islands Council to help us address this. As a charity with an ever decreasing grant award, buying premises is out of the question. Highlands and Islands Enterprise on the other had have been more supportive and are still working with us to find alternatives. It is likely that our costs will escalate considerably with additional rent, electricity and moving costs and so we will have to look at how we can deliver our service on a substantially smaller budget which will inevitably mean a reduction in service. Orkney Islands Council has suggested that the cic should contribute more to compensate for the additional costs but it the cic is still a very young company and despite doing very well, its quite unrealistic that they should shoulder these extra costs.

Orkney Islands Council worked closely with us to arrange a 3 year funding package that ends this year. This was a real breakthrough for us and meant that we could final forward plan. However, we have been in early discussions about next years funding and it looks less likely that a similar arrangement will be made again. This is a real hurdle and causes unnecessary stress for our staff and management team with a lack of job security and an unknown future.

- **Access to concessionary fares schemes**

  We are fortunate that Orkney Islands Council support us by providing eligible members with one free return journey a week with our service for which we are reimbursed at 100%. We realised that a dialabus service is an expensive service to run and so off our own backs, we introduced a flexible town service 2 years ago in conjunction with our community interest company. They registered the flexible service 3 days per week and because of this Scotland-wide concessionary travel card holders were able to use the service free of charge. Initially there was some resistance for dialabus users to use the service but it soon became popular as many elderly and disabled people realised that they could now travel more frequently at no extra cost. Despite the good uptake and passenger numbers, like many bus services in more isolated communities, it could not pay for itself without subsidy. I demonstrated to the local transport section how the introduction of the service had reduced our claims from their local concessionary travel scheme and estimated this to exceed £15k in the year. However, as this was a separate pot from the public service bus budget, they would not give consideration to financial assistance for such a route despite the obvious saving it was making. The route needn’t necessarily have been done by us and could have been offered as a contract but with such a significant saving and so many more opportunities for elderly and disabled people to travel, I felt it was very short sighted not to investigate it purely because it affected a different budget.

  We operate on the Mainland of Orkney but there is no local concessionary fare for isles members as Orkney Islands Council deem their boat fare as their equivalent bus. It’s not much use to them though if they are unable to make the journey from their home to the boat.
Nonetheless, I know we are fortunate to have any concessionary scheme at all and I feel that a national scheme that does not exclude people with access needs is necessary. Orkney is extremely limited in the number of public buses with wheelchair access and even more limited by the frequency of buses and so supporting community transport travellers to meet the cost of their travel would be a real positive move for elderly and disabled people.

**Orkney Disability Forum**

**19 April 2013**