Background

Stirling has a wide rural hinterland, as well as a number of small towns and villages, therefore transport issues in these areas largely relate to problems of accessibility to key services.

Stirling Council currently provides transport services in these areas, such as demand responsive transport services and supported bus services. It also continues to consider the potential and ability of community transport to help provide socially necessary services, and funds certain community transport schemes such as the rural element of the Women’s Royal Voluntary Service (WRVS) ‘voluntary driver’ scheme.

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

In our opinion, Community Transport encompasses three main strands:

1. Transport provided specifically for disabled people by a charitable organisation, voluntary group or local authority. This may involve the use of specialised vehicles with staff trained to deal with disability issues.

2. Transport provided for the general public by a charitable or voluntary community-based group. This may be by means of a minibus or by community car schemes.

3. Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) provided by a commercial operator or community-based group operating under a local authority contract.

In category (1), we have strong representation in the Stirling and Clackmannanshire Council areas through the activities of Order of Malta Dial-a-Journey Ltd.

In category (2) we have some service provision in the Stirling Council area and almost no representation in Clackmannanshire. In the Stirling Council area, Killin Community Bus operates primarily as a low-cost resource for local community groups, clubs and societies, rather than providing day-to-day links to shops, health facilities, and so on.
The Women's Royal Voluntary Service (WRVS) operates a ‘voluntary driver’ scheme. The rural element of which has been funded for many years by Stirling Council through a contract with Social Services. It covers rural transport in Stirling and provides for older people only. This past year it received Change Funding from the Reshaping Care for Older people’s partnership to cover the urban areas too. It provides a professional, well managed service and is an option that offers opportunities for community focused and localised volunteer driving coordination without the burden on small community groups. The core administrative and management costs of this are funded by the contract but the clients pay the volunteer mileage rate of £0.45 per mile directly to the volunteer. This is not managed by WRVS. It is also in the process of receiving change funding to set the service up in Clacks.

There are volunteer drivers attached to other forms of voluntary care services such as Dementia Day Cares and Health peer support groups. The Red Cross is re-developing their patient transport volunteer schemes as well and of course the Ambulance Service Volunteers. There is also a co-operative car scheme in Fintry called ‘FEET’. In Clackmannanshire, the Disability Awareness Group has recently expressed an interest in community transport.

In short, we have some voluntary care services, however they generally are not coordinated, have a variety of purposes and tend to be born out of filling a gap or transport barrier rather than strategic planning. The lack of a strategic approach across has resulted in a myriad of local schemes, all with different rules.

In category (3), we also have strong representation in the Stirling Council area, where we have replaced several failing rural bus services with DRT operated by several locally-based commercial suppliers operating to Council rules under Council contracts. These suppliers are all small taxi and private car hire operators, most of whom have provided school transport under council contracts for several years. This approach reflects a lack of historical development of community-based voluntary transport schemes in the area.

**Theme two: The growing demand for community transport provision**

Demand for community transport is growing, particularly in rural areas, due to a number of social and economic factors. This has fostered the growth of DRT as a more successful replacement for failing rural bus services. However, DRT is an expensive service to provide and there is always a danger of service costs outstripping the available budget if demand rises to greater levels than forecast.
Community based transport provision may be able to attune itself more to community needs. However, particularly in this current economic climate, there is the issue of securing long term funding, in order to provide a sustainable service that grows to reflect the potentially changing needs of the community.

**Theme Three: A lack of a coordinated approach with NHS bodies and community transport providers**

Traditionally, there has been little contact between NHS bodies and community transport providers. In the Stirling Council area, this has been mitigated by good partnership working between Order of Malta Dial-a-Journey Ltd and the Scottish Ambulance Service. However, this initiated as informal co-operation between individuals, rather than formal co-ordination involving both bodies. Recently, the Scottish Ambulance Service’s Scheduled Care Programme has taken the transport issue on board. However, local authorities could develop a co-ordinating role between the two sectors, providing a more uniform approach and relieving NHS bodies from the need to deal directly with a range of different voluntary organisations.

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

Community transport, in all its forms, can embrace health-related non-emergency transport for patients and visitors. However, the question arises of who pays. The economics of subsidised on-demand transport are such that, in contrast to a conventional fixed-timetable service, the more a service is used, the more it costs to provide. Therefore, if the Patient Transport Service is carrying fewer non-emergency patients and these patients are making use of community transport, there is a danger of the community transport scheme being unable to sustain the additional costs. If the NHS makes savings through a move from NHS-based to community-based transport provision, then the community transport sector should receive a share of these savings, in order to ensure its long term sustainability.

Apart from the availability of specialised vehicles for disabled people, the provision of community transport is primarily about one issue – cost to the customer. At present, the Stirling and Clackmannanshire Council areas have 100% coverage by demand responsive transport, 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. This is because anyone can book a taxi or private hire car at any time and pay the full commercial rate. For most residents, the full commercial rate is the issue, not the availability of a transport service.
Theme Five: Replacing community transport vehicles and funding planning

Any community transport scheme that involves a voluntary organisation owning or leasing its own vehicles bring with it onerous responsibilities for ensuring that maintenance systems are in place and that vehicle replacement is properly accounted for by depreciation. An advantage of using existing taxi and private car hire operators to provide DRT is that these processes are already in place.

Payments given to volunteers in ‘volunteer driver’ schemes which make use of privately-owned vehicles generally reflect the fact that the vehicles are maintained and replaced by their owners.

It is therefore essential to ensure that any community transport scheme involving the ownership of vehicles has maintenance and financial processes in place that will ensure that maintenance and depreciation are adequately accounted for. Assistance in this respect can be offered by the Community Transport Association and local authorities.

Theme Six: Access to concessionary fares schemes

Where community transport forms part of the overall public transport network and non-concessionary passengers are being charged separate fares, then community transport operators should be able to join the concessionary fares scheme. This widens the range of solutions available to local authorities in proving public transport cost-effectively, particularly in rural areas of low population density.

Other comments

Establishing and managing a community transport scheme that operates its own vehicles and employs staff or depends on the active participation of volunteers is an onerous undertaking. We have had a couple of cases where people expressed an interest in community transport, but were daunted when they became fully aware of what they might have to take on. The Community Transport Association has an excellent reputation for providing specialised advice and local authorities can also offer advice and assistance. In our experience, these schemes work best when they come from the bottom up, that is, where the push to establish a scheme comes from the community itself, with the local authority acting as a facilitator.

Stirling Council
19 April 2013