COMMUNITY TRANSPORT INQUIRY
THORNHILL AND DISTRICT COMMUNITY TRANSPORT
WRITTEN SUBMISSION

Introduction
We are a small, rural Community Transport Association, originally set up, as Thornhill Age Concern, specifically to address the transport needs of the elderly in the Thornhill area in about 1986. We expanded our remit in 2006, in the process changing our name to Thornhill & District Community Transport, and now seek to address issues of rural isolation by the provision of low-cost, disabled-accessible, transport to groups (and some individuals) of all ages in the Thornhill area, who might otherwise suffer the disadvantage of rural isolation due to lack of available, suitable, affordable transport. We currently operate one 16 seater, disabled-friendly minibus, which, and whose predecessors, have been provided by a mixture of generous local support and funding from such bodies as Dumfries & Galloway Council and the Scottish Government. Our charges are set at a level that strikes a balance between affordability for our various users and our need to run the organisation on a sustainable basis day to day. We have approximately 15 volunteers, the vast majority of whom are MiDAS trained and three of whom, the Vice Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer, form a de facto Executive, though all volunteers are considered members of the Association. Amongst these we also have a Bookings Secretary and a Bus Manager; all are volunteers. We cater for local clubs and societies, schools, social groupings of the elderly, those with disabilities, places of worship and so on. See also our page at www.visithornhill.co.uk/community-transport

Main issues facing us:

Running costs – general; scheduled routes
We receive no subsidy from any other body at present (except a small grant from Dumfries & Galloway Council and as noted later). Our current structure of charges is £0.70/mile for the first 100 miles and £0.50/mile thereafter. Children’s Groups pay £0.40/mile for all journeys and formal school groups £0.50/mile. All groups also pay £1/hr for the time the vehicle is away from its base. We have no paid members of staff. We find this to be a sustainable model, insofar as it covers our costs (maintaining, insuring and fuelling our one vehicle, plus a very small sum to cover admin costs and public liability insurance.) We note, however, that some other Community Transport groups in the area are able to charge less; deriving, in some cases, only some 60% of their running costs from charges. In addition to our Group Hires (by which we mean, say, providing transport for outings from Homes for the Elderly, or taking groups of Scouts or Guides bowling or to the cinema), we operate a total of four scheduled routes: two alternating, fortnightly services between Thornhill and Dumfries by different routes; a monthly trip to Castle Douglas and, in the summer months only, a
monthly trip to Moffat. The vast majority of the users of these services are elderly people in possession of a bus pass. Until recently, we were able to account to Dumfries & Galloway Council for the number of passengers travelling on concessionary fares whom we transported and received a rebate. Since responsibility for this passed to Transport Scotland, the situation has become more difficult; indeed, for us, and for many similar, very small CTAs, the scheme no longer works. Transport Scotland insist on returns being made using an electronic ticket machine which would cost more than our entire annual turnover. We further understand from neighbouring CTAs that these machines are difficult to use, expensive to maintain and, in any case, highly unreliable. These costs, leaving aside the acquisition costs, are disproportionate to the rebate of fares involved. When our MSP enquired, on our behalf, into this, the response from Transport Scotland was unhelpful and, indeed, dismissive. All CTAs, our MSP was told, were issued with ticket machines a few years ago and that was that. No such machine was issued, or offered, to us or to a number of smaller CTAs in this area. Without them, Transport Scotland will not entertain our rebate claims and we, and similar CTAs have had to fund these routes ourselves, or discontinue them, thus increasing the isolation of the rural elderly. An organisation the size of ours cannot operate such a service for nothing but Transport Scotland appeared to be unmoved by this. We accordingly approached local Community Councils for a subsidy, using Windfarm funds and have recently been notified that this application has been successful. The applications will need to be made year by year, however, with no guarantee of continuing success and the opinion has been expressed that this is merely diverting monies from other worthy local projects to address a problem caused, not by there being no funds available from Transport Scotland, but by that organisation’s unwillingness to address the issues faced by very small organisations such as ours. There has been some suggestion of another issue of ticket machines to those CTAs that do not have one, but this ignores the running costs and reliability issues mentioned above. A little imagination on the part of Transport Scotland might have produced an ‘app’ that could be run from a smartphone or tablet computer, and which could be made available to CTAs of all sizes, thereby addressing a number of the issues raised. It is very disappointing for voluntary organisations, many very small, operating on tiny budgets, but performing valuable work in their communities, to be palmed off in so indifferent a manner by a government department.

**Running costs – vehicle replacement**

Our current vehicle, an accessible, 16-seater Volkswagen Crafter, is approaching 6 years old. We might expect it to last another 4 years or so before it becomes troublesome and too expensive to maintain. At the time of writing, a replacement vehicle of similar specification would cost some £50,000. We are fortunate in having a fairly substantial vehicle replacement fund, but it amounts only to about half the cost of a new vehicle. We would not expect any very substantial realisation of funds from the sale of our existing vehicle, either now or in 4 years’ time; indeed, our previous vehicle proved very difficult to dispose of. The sum
raised from the eventual disposal of that vehicle was very small; nonetheless it is still operated by a local school. Our day to day operation does not materially add to that fund year on year and we are of the view that our charges (especially in view of the remarks about charges levied by other local CTAs above) are high enough as they are. For these reasons, we would be looking for grant assistance from other bodies of the order of £30,000 or so, were we to be thinking of replacing our bus now and, inevitably, more in a few years' time. The availability of such funds can never be guaranteed.

**Driver Succession - 'the D1 problem'**
Rather than rehearse the arguments here, we merely state that we endorse the remarks made on this subject by the Dumfries & Galloway Affordable Transport Forum on behalf of ourselves and other D&G CTAs.

**Opportunities:**

**Rural Transport Solutions/Northern Periphery Programme**
Dumfries & Galloway Council has recently been involved in the setting up of a Rural Transport scheme in Wigtownshire, an area with yet more pressing issues of rural isolation and deprivation than we have here, though this is not to belittle the issues faced in Mid and Upper Nithsdale. This scheme has brought together a number of transport operators, such as Day Centres, the Council's own Yellow Bus service and the pre-existing Wigtownshire Community Transport, under the umbrella of Wigtownshire Community Transport. This provides more access to the existing pool of vehicles, reducing the instances of, as had formerly been the case, vehicles lying idle whilst groups, who would like to use them, could not do so for administrative or what might be called 'territorial' reasons. We understand that links have also been established with the Scottish Ambulance Service's non-emergency Patient Transport service and collaborative working has begun. The result of this seems to have been a more flexible service and, because Community Transport has less strict criteria and there are overall more places available, patients' relatives and carers have been enabled to travel to appointments with them, or simply to travel with them and, perhaps, fulfil errands of their own. The benefits to the rurally isolated will be enormous and, we understand, this greatly improved scheme has actually resulted in an overall cost saving. At the same time, the combined service is able to continue to provide its traditional services to groups of the elderly, local clubs and societies, schools and the like. Schools are increasingly looking to Community Transport to service small scale trips (particularly in view of the opportunities provided by Curriculum for Excellence). We have, in recent years, been able to provide much lower cost transport to a local Secondary School, enabling it to take part in the Shakespeare for Schools scheme, which, otherwise, they would not have been able to afford to do, as several trips to Edinburgh and Glasgow were required. The writer was also recently able to put another school in touch with Wigtownshire CT, who were able to support a trip that the school might otherwise have struggled to afford to mount.
We, at Thornhill, have been involved in some discussions with Dumfries & Galloway Council, regarding the setting up of a similar, 'joined up' Rural Transport scheme in Mid and Upper Nithsdale. In principle, we are keen to participate and we already work, to some extent, with one or two other small, local CTAs, notably Cairn Valley. There are three other local CTAs, based in Dumfries, Sanquhar and Kirkconnel, respectively, who might be willing to join such a scheme, though we cannot, at this stage, speak for them. From our own point of view, we would need to recruit more volunteer drivers and somewhat change the shape of our organisation. We are also of the view that, since our organisation was set up by, and generously funded by, local people, who have liberally contributed to the purchase, and running, costs of the various vehicles we have owned, they would expect us - as, indeed, we would wish - to retain our unique identity and autonomy, although participating in a wider scheme. An integrated booking scheme would be needed, which recognised the individual operational requirements and commitments of the participating CTAs. We already, in a small way, operate a 'brokerage' scheme, whereby some of our drivers will source a vehicle from a neighbouring CTA should we receive a booking request we cannot meet because our own vehicle is already engaged. Some CTAs might need to alter their Constitutions to allow this, as they have, for example, a rule that their vehicle(s) can only be used by an organisation based in their own particular catchment area. We have no such rule, though we would always prioritise the needs of a group from our own district. We are of the view, however, that it is both beneficial to the community at large, as well as ourselves, to make our vehicle as widely available as possible upon request, although we always require it to be driven by one of our own panel of trained and approved drivers. This both protects the condition of the vehicle, provides quality assurance and means that it is out 'earning its keep' as much as possible. Vehicles of this type and quality are more affected by age than by usage in the right hands. Their design life far exceeds any mileage we do, or are likely to do, over the probable ten year span of ownership. We therefore await, with keen interest, Dumfries & Galloway Council's proposals in this regard. The Wigtownshire scheme employs a full time Manager, and we anticipate one would be needed for such a scheme in Mid and Upper Nithsdale also.

Other plans
Meantime, whilst awaiting news from Dumfries & Galloway Council on any greater Nithsdale scheme, we have been interested to learn, recently, of a free evening hospital visiting scheme operating in Glasgow, enabling relatives of patients in a number of Glasgow hospitals to book door to door transport on a 'ring and ride' basis. It goes without saying that many of the users of such a scheme will, themselves, be elderly or infirm and the lack of public transport, particularly to and from isolated locations and in the evenings, is much more acute in an area such as ours. We are beginning to investigate this matter in detail, including plans to consult local people, local Doctors, NHS Practitioners and the like, as to the viability of such a scheme, and to look at ways of funding it, including possible collaborative working with other CTAs and/or the acquisition
of additional, or different, types of vehicle. We are also interested in the possibility of exploring the provision of a community car scheme, enabling the rurally isolated easier access to Doctor's appointments and the like, as also, simply, the chance of more social interaction, which is known to bring considerable health benefits. This, as mentioned above, would also require some administrative support, as also the recruitment of a larger number of volunteers.

Conclusion

As previously mentioned, we, and other small CTAs like us, form an essential building block of our rural community and at minimal cost, running, as we do, on very small amounts of money, operated by the hard work and enthusiasm of volunteers and supported by the generosity of local people, as well as some support from local and national government. The present economic climate, as demonstrated above, has focussed communities on making the most they can of existing assets, including ensuring more efficient utilisation of equipment and facilities. Although this has been forced upon us all by global conditions, the efficiency savings to central and local government have been substantial. Community cohesion has benefitted also. Organisations such as ours can make further contributions to efficiency savings and community solidarity, and this can be done by Government continuing, refining and enhancing its support to us, both in financial terms and in the offer of larger scale organisational expertise where needed. We need, however, to be allowed to retain our local identity, integrity and autonomy, as that is the key to retaining local support and interest. We look forward to working more closely both with local and national government to serve our community all the better in the future.

Thornhill and District Community Transport
23 April, 2013.