



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

INFRASTRUCTURE AND CAPITAL INVESTMENT COMMITTEE

Wednesday 29 May 2013

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INFRASTRUCTURE AND CAPITAL INVESTMENT COMMITTEE
12th Meeting 2013, Session 4

CONVENER

*Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Adam Ingram (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Jim Eadie (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)

*Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)

*Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)

*Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Mike Harrison

Alice McFarlane

Jackie Paterson

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

LOCATION

Committee Room 3

Scottish Parliament

Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee

Wednesday 29 May 2013

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 11:02*]

Community Transport Inquiry

The Convener (Maureen Watt): I welcome everyone to the 12th meeting in 2013 of the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee. I remind everyone in the room to switch off their mobile devices, as they affect the broadcasting system. Witnesses should note that some members are using tablets during the meeting, but that is because we provide the papers in digital format and members will be accessing their briefing papers for the meeting.

We have received apologies from Adam Ingram and from his substitute, Gil Paterson.

The first item on the agenda and our main business today is our inquiry into community transport. We will hear evidence from users as part of our inquiry. This is the fourth oral evidence session in the inquiry and the final one before we hear from the minister next week.

Today, we are keen to hear from those who use community transport services about their experiences of community transport, what they feel are the important issues and what improvements might be made. We are all grateful to the witnesses for coming to speak to us.

I welcome Mike Harrison, a user of Handicabs, which is now called HcL; Alice McFarlane, a user of South West Community Transport, which is in Glasgow rather than the south-west of Scotland; and Jackie Paterson, a user of dial-a-journey in Stirling. Folks, would you like to say a bit about yourselves?

Alice McFarlane: As you said, convener, I am a user of community transport. I am also chairperson of a seniors forum and I am involved with the national health service and various other groups in Glasgow.

Mike Harrison: I have been disabled for the past seven years. Before that, I was heavily involved in campaigning for sustainable transport. I was on the board of Transform Scotland and involved with rail development as well as cycling. I am now a user of HcL and on its board. I am also chairman of the Midlothian disability access panel. That is my background.

Jackie Paterson: I live in Alloa, but dial-a-journey is based in Stirling. I have used the service since it started in 1987, when I had to give up work. I am also involved in the local branch of the Multiple Sclerosis Society, which uses dial-a-journey for transport to its meetings.

The Convener: Thanks. Is the main reason that you use community transport for shopping, hospital visits or what? How often do you use it?

Jackie Paterson: People use it for every aspect of their lives. They use it for appointments with a doctor, dentist or hairdresser; shopping; hospital appointments; and social activities, such as going to the pictures or the theatre. They use it for everything. Without it, many people would be stuck in the house. We rely totally on the community transport service. Fortunately, dial-a-journey is a very good community transport service, so we are lucky in Stirling.

The Convener: Would you be stuck in the house if you did not use community transport? Do you use other forms of transport?

Jackie Paterson: I use other forms of transport. I live in Alloa so, as we have our rail link back, I can take the train to Stirling or Glasgow—the station is just round the corner from me. However, that is all, as the train does not take me anywhere else—obviously, the line does not go to my health centre. I am lucky with community transport from that point of view.

I do not feel confident using public service buses, because I am not secured on them. My last experience—I hope that it is my final one—was when I was coming back from Stirling one day. I decided to nip on a bus because I had missed my train to Alloa, which goes only once an hour. It had been raining, so the floor of the bus was very wet. When we went round a corner, my wheelchair slid right across the bus—I was trying to hang on to a pole. If I had gone into somebody, it would have been horrible. I am very reluctant to use public service buses because I do not feel safe. It is terrifying.

Mike Harrison: I use community transport a lot less than I used to. I am able to use buses and probably use about 20 to 30 buses a week. I was on four buses yesterday, have been on two this morning and will be on eight tomorrow, so I use buses a lot. I am fortunate that there is a good bus service in Edinburgh, the buses are all accessible and the drivers are very helpful.

That side of things is very good, but there are places that I cannot get to easily by bus. Some journeys that I make would involve three buses and, including connections, might take up to two and a half hours; I can make the same journey in 20 minutes using community transport. Some

places are difficult to get to by bus, so I use HcL for those journeys.

The Convener: Over a month, for what percentage of your journeys do you use Lothian Buses and for what percentage do you use HcL?

Mike Harrison: I probably do not use HcL more than about four times a year—except for going to HcL meetings.

Alice McFarlane: I am very fortunate as I can use public transport, but community transport is the only way that some of the ladies on the seniors forum get out. The forum tries to take them to different places. We have visited the Parliament courtesy of Johann Lamont, when we had a wonderful day. We have also visited various accessible places in and around Glasgow. We meet in a sheltered housing complex and some of the ladies do not get out unless we go places with them. We have the hoppa shoppa and do different things like that—we also have days away with the hoppa shoppa group.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): We are interested in the cost of community transport services. Do you have any comments to make on that, either from your own experience of having to pay for community transport or from other people's experiences?

Jackie Paterson: It can be quite expensive for someone who uses community transport a lot. For me, a return journey to Stirling is nearly £9. If I went by train, it would be £3-odd. That is a big difference, but people get an excellent service for their money from community transport. Somebody comes to their door, comes in and helps them with their jacket, for example, if they need help. It is expensive, but it is an excellent service and it is subsidised. Using a commercial taxi company, even with a taxi card, would be an awful lot more expensive.

Alex Johnstone: Do you think that it is good value for money?

Jackie Paterson: It is good value for money because of the service that is offered. Commercial taxi firms do not offer the same level of care that dial-a-journey offers. However, in a week when I have to go out two or three times, it soon adds up—and that is in addition to the cost of what I am already doing. People might argue that that is what I get my mobility allowance for. Somebody said that to me.

Mike Harrison: Somebody who uses taxis a lot may well have a local taxi driver whom they use regularly, who knows their needs and who will provide the kind of help that people get from dial-a-journey. However, the service that is offered by casual taxis can vary a lot. Some are very good and some are very careless—that is the only way

that I can describe it. Also, the cost of taxis is huge. I live out in Midlothian and it costs me £15 or so to get into Edinburgh by taxi.

Alex Johnstone: What would the community transport alternative cost?

Mike Harrison: It is £3.75 for the first mile and 25p per mile after that. Most journeys are £5, £6 or £7.

Alex Johnstone: So even community transport is cheaper than using a taxi.

Mike Harrison: Yes, and people get what HcL describes as a door-through-door service. The driver comes into the person's house and helps them to get out and lock the doors. Sometimes, that involves moving snow from the drive to get someone down the path. A taxi driver would not do that.

Alex Johnstone: Is that your experience as well, Alice?

Alice McFarlane: Yes, my ladies find that it is a personal service. The hoppa shoppa picks up everyone—maybe 10 or 11 ladies at the one time—and takes them to the shops. That provides company and chat for them, and it keeps them up to date with what is going on in the community.

Basically, the service is wonderful as far as my ladies are concerned—they just love it, and we use it as much as we can. We find funding from various sources to allow us to use it. It also provides a visiting service to hospitals. If any of you know Glasgow, you will know that getting to the Southern general hospital or Gartnavel hospital at any given time is a nightmare. The service takes people there and brings them back.

Alex Johnstone: Quite a few people on the provision side have raised the issue of the cost associated with making it to hospital appointments and that sort of thing. I would be interested in your views on that and any knowledge you can bring to the subject. Do you have any experience of that, or do you know people who have experience of that?

Jackie Paterson: I had experience of that a couple of weeks ago. A gentleman member of the branch had tried to organise dial-a-journey to attend a hospital appointment but there was nothing available and he ended up getting a taxi. An hour before he was due to go, the taxi firm phoned him up and said that it could not take him, so he had to get another private taxi firm to take him. It was an awful lot more expensive than it would have been to go by dial-a-journey and the service was not as good because the taxi firm cancelled at short notice, which dial-a-journey would never do.

It is expensive to travel. I often go to things at the Macrobert arts centre, which is the theatre at the University of Stirling, and for me to go there and back should cost the same as going to Stirling—less than £9—but I was charged £18 for a single journey up there by a private taxi firm. It actually charged me a premium because I am a wheelchair user, which is absolutely shocking.

I made various inquiries with the local council and the citizens advice bureau, and they said that I entered into the contract so there is nothing to be done. I really wanted to put it into the local paper but then I thought, “What if I need to use that firm again?”

11:15

Alex Johnstone: I wonder whether that is actually legal. If it is, we should maybe think about doing something about it.

Jackie Paterson: I did not think that it was legal because those companies are supposed to offer the same service to everyone. It argued that it takes the driver longer to get the wheelchair clamped in, but it is not that much longer.

Alex Johnstone: Perhaps that is a sub-issue that we ought to be dealing with as part of our inquiry.

Jackie Paterson: It would be interesting to find out exactly what the law is.

Alex Johnstone: Does anyone else on the panel have experience or knowledge of making it to hospital appointments?

Mike Harrison: One problem with using community transport is that both outward and return journeys have to be booked in advance. As you know, people never quite know when they are going to be seen for their hospital appointments. That can cause problems because we need to anticipate the time that we will be returning home, whereas with a taxi we can just call it when we need it.

Jackie Paterson: With dial-a-journey, you can call for a return. It offers that service. However, if you use the patient transport, you can go halfway around central Scotland before you get home. You could be on the bus for three hours.

Alex Johnstone: Which is okay if you want a bus run.

Jackie Paterson: Yes; if you wanted a day out, you could take your picnic basket and you would be fine.

Alice McFarlane: It would be good if you wanted to see the scenery.

The ladies who use the service to go to hospital are more than happy with it. They are quite happy

to pay what is asked of them. They get taken for appointments and the service waits for them and brings them home. They think that it is a wonderful service.

As I have said, I am fortunate because I do not need to do that to go to hospital. I can get there under my own steam, but lots of the ladies cannot do that. We had one lady whose husband was in hospital, and she used the night-visiting service. She thought that the service was absolutely wonderful. The driver made sure that she was safely into the house—Ellen is quite disabled herself—and she could not praise the service highly enough. It was necessary but it cost her an absolute fortune to get taxis to the Southern general and back to see her husband.

Alex Johnstone: In answer to one of the earlier questions, you all said a bit about using bus transport. Do you all have access to concessionary travel?

Jackie Paterson: Yes.

Mike Harrison: Yes.

Alex Johnstone: Mr Harrison particularly spoke about the fact that he now uses bus transport more than he used to. Is that an indication that the service that is being provided by service buses is better for people who have a disability than it used to be?

Mike Harrison: It is partly that and partly just me getting more confidence in my mobility. When I first started out, not all the buses had ramps. Even Lothian Buses buses did not all have ramps, but at least those that did were put on particular routes so that I knew that some routes were accessible and some were not. The problem with some of the other companies, such as FirstBus, was that we never quite knew whether a bus was going to be accessible or not. It said that we could phone the depot and they would tell us.

Alex Johnstone: You could phone the depot and they would guess.

Mike Harrison: Yes. That was not practical every time you wanted a bus. Therefore, one reason why I use the buses more is that the services are more reliable. In the winter, ramps occasionally get stuck with snow and salt, but the drivers are very good at reporting that and getting it sorted quickly.

Alex Johnstone: Is there any sign of improvement in that provision in other areas?

Mike Harrison: I think that the ramps are beginning to be installed. There are another two years in which to complete the process.

Alex Johnstone: Can you point to us any evidence of improvement?

Alice McFarlane: Brockburn Road has just lost its FirstBus service. We do not know which bus company is going to supply a bus—the ladies and gentlemen do not know whether there will be a bus at all. It would take a healthy person about 20 minutes to walk from the sheltered housing complex to the nearest operational bus stop; people who are not good at walking or who cannot walk will be housebound, without any form of public transport whatsoever.

Alex Johnstone: Jackie, you said that you do not use public transport as much as you used to.

Jackie Paterson: I said that I was terrified. Most of the buses in my area are accessible, and most of the bus stops in the area have adapted kerbs to help people get on and off, but I still find it difficult to manoeuvre on public service buses. It is not easy to get a wheelchair into the space that has been allocated for it and, once you are there, you are not secured, which I find quite frightening.

Alex Johnstone: Do you ever feel that the cost of community transport persuades you that you ought to be using public transport, even though community transport might be more convenient?

Jackie Paterson: It depends on your circumstances. A lot of people will be guided by the cost. Can they afford to use community transport? People who can use the bus for free will obviously do that, even though it might not be as convenient. I am quite lucky in that I can afford to use community transport, so I do.

Alex Johnstone: Mr Harrison, was your decision to use buses most of the time driven by cost?

Mike Harrison: No. It is simply because I like the independence. If I use a bus, I do not have to organise things in advance. It also gives me some exercise, which I need. I used to cycle 200 miles a week as a matter of course; the only exercise I get now is pushing myself about.

Alex Johnstone: During the course of our inquiry, some of our witnesses have said interesting things about extending concessionary travel into the community transport sector. We have had some enthusiastic supporters of that and we have also had some people who have suggested that there would be problems. What are your views on the subject?

Mike Harrison: I forgot to say earlier that I am the secretary of the Scottish Accessible Transport Alliance. A lot of our members have asked me to raise the issue of concessionary travel today. Many of them feel strongly that, if the law currently does not allow section 19 services to qualify for concessionary transport schemes, the law should be changed. I know that that is the difficulty at the

moment. I have seen a letter from a minister to one of our members on that point.

Alex Johnstone: I saw your face light up when I mentioned the issue, Alice.

Alice McFarlane: There is a move to have the concessionary travel scheme extended to community transport, because a lot of people who have concessionary bus passes are unable to use them. If the passes could be used on community transport, it would be like opening a big door into the real world for lots of people.

Jackie Paterson: Yes, it would be like opening a door. However, given the world that we live in, can we afford that as well? A lot of people who can afford to pay for their own transport are using their concessionary bus passes. I do not want to make this too political, but we live in straitened times, and I think that the whole issue needs to be looked at.

Alex Johnstone: You and I might have common ground on that. Maybe we can afford to do it if we do not spend the money on something else.

Jackie Paterson: Let's not go there.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): I want to ask the panel about their interaction with community transport operators. Mr Harrison, you said that you use community transport only four times a year. Jackie, you said that you use it quite often for going to the dentist and doctor and for shopping and so on. How often would an average user use community transport? Is it every day, a couple of times a week or once a month?

Jackie Paterson: There are people who use the dial-a-journey service every day to go to centres and so on. The council has set up contracts, and the contractors do school runs for disabled children and journeys to take disabled adults to centres.

I use dial-a-journey two or three times a week. Every Tuesday, we use the bus to go for hyperbaric oxygen therapy. We could not use public transport to get there because of where it is; we certainly could not use the train, either. We need to use community transport for that.

We also use it for all the nice things that we do. If I am going somewhere with my husband, I do not use community transport; it is only when I am going out on my own that I use it. My husband works so I have to use it during the week.

Alice McFarlane: We had a lady who lived about 50 yards from the bus but she could not get to the bus so she had to use community transport whenever she wanted to go anywhere. The public bus has been taken off so, unless another

company picks up the slack and puts on a bus, my ladies will all have to use community transport to get anywhere.

Gordon MacDonald: Before the bus was taken off, how often would you have used community transport?

Alice McFarlane: I should have asked the ladies in Brockburn before I came here.

Gordon MacDonald: Just roughly.

Alice McFarlane: They use it every time that they go shopping. The hoppa shoppa service is very well used.

Gordon MacDonald: Does it operate every day or a couple of times a week?

Alice McFarlane: A couple of times a week. It means that you know when you can go shopping and get back safely.

Gordon MacDonald: How do you book a trip on community transport?

Alice McFarlane: You phone. My ladies phone or I phone for them. I have taken my ladies to places all over Glasgow. I get funding from various sources, and we put in money, too. It is always community transport that we use to get there because some people are in wheelchairs. The service that is provided is a personal service—you do not feel that you are a nuisance or a burden. Because they can use community transport, the ladies that need it feel part of the group.

Gordon MacDonald: Can you always get the slot that you want on a particular day at a particular time, or do you have to alter your journey in order to fit in with where the space is?

Alice McFarlane: We meet once a month and I know in advance where we are going. I get in touch with Margaret Urie and sort that out.

Mike Harrison: The problem with HcL is that the demand is greater than the supply. About 10 per cent of requests for transport have to be turned down because there are not enough drivers or vehicles to cover them. There are informal restrictions on booking. You cannot make a regular booking for doing something every week because that ties things up too much in a rigid structure. You can only book a fortnight ahead or for a couple of occasions.

A lot of the dial-a-ride journeys are one person going to one place, rather than a group. The dial-a-bus service deals with shopping; dial-a-ride tends to be one person. However, we are talking about 3,500 trips a month being provided. I do not know how many times a week or how many times a month other people are using the service.

11:30

Jackie Paterson: A common complaint from dial-a-journey users is that they cannot get a bus. You hear them saying, "I tried to get a bus, but I couldn't get one." I generally find that I am able to get a bus, but sometimes I might need to alter my time a wee bit to fit in or, for the return journey, I might need to share a bus with someone who needs to be dropped off in Bridge of Allan on the way back to Alloa. However, that is not a problem. Very occasionally, there is just nothing available.

We have a mad scramble, however, because the dial-a-journey booking system takes bookings only three days in advance. Bookings start being taken at 10 o'clock in the morning, so we all sit there at 10 o'clock in the morning—

Alex Johnstone: Is that by phone?

Jackie Paterson: Yes—by pressing redial. Sometimes, even if you get through at 20 past 10, there is nothing available. It depends.

Advance bookings are taken for hospital appointments, but the policy is not to take standing bookings. We have a standing booking to go for our oxygen every week, but we have had that for 25 years, so we can hardly be told now, "No, we have changed our policy, and you will have to take your chance." Some people have historical standing bookings, but the policy now is not to take such bookings. Advance bookings will be taken for a hospital appointment, but otherwise they can be taken only three days in advance.

Gordon MacDonald: Do you see any way of improving the booking system? Is there anything that you think would be a good idea?

Jackie Paterson: Over the years, various booking systems have been tried, but there are always complaints. There is always someone who is not happy with the booking system, but I think that the current one works as well as any other. You just have to take your chance like everybody else.

Alice McFarlane: The reason that most of my ladies use the community transport hoppa shoppa is that trying to book dial-a-bus is an absolute nightmare. As far as I know, our dial-a-bus system does not take group bookings but will take only one person, or two if you happen to book at the same time. I have heard that it is a nightmare to try to book dial-a-bus for anything.

Mike Harrison: One point to consider is the need for co-ordination among the different organisations. From the user's point of view, it would be nice if we did not need to shop around to find someone who can take us. If one group cannot take us, perhaps it could link into another group's booking system to see whether someone else is available. For example, if I want a taxi, I

phone one of the three companies in Edinburgh that controls the group of taxis. I do not need to approach individual taxi owners to find a taxi, as that is done through a group booking. That kind of thing could help in community transport.

Gordon MacDonald: So we need a more co-ordinated booking service among all the different agencies that operate.

Mike Harrison: That would be nice.

Gordon MacDonald: Is there any other way that we could improve community transport? Is there anything else that would be beneficial to the users?

Jackie Paterson: More money.

Alice McFarlane: That is the bottom line.

Jackie Paterson: More money, more buses and more drivers. The service is great but, as Mike Harrison said, there is more demand than there are buses.

Gordon MacDonald: What are the barriers to getting volunteers to come forward?

Jackie Paterson: I might not be the right person to ask, because dial-a-journey is not run by volunteers. Although it is a charity, it is also a business. There are aspects of dial-a-journey that are commercial businesses. For example, dial-a-journey provides the NHS contract for the new hospital and it has a contract with local councils to provide accessible transport on service routes. That was set up to subsidise the core business of providing transport for disabled people, which is what dial-a-journey was originally set up to do. Dial-a-journey is a different kind of animal from the usual community transport organisation.

The core business is the passenger service for people with disabilities, but there is also a commercial arm. The dial-a-journey service is subsidised by local councils and is under constant scrutiny. There used to be three-year agreements, but they have been cut to one year now. Every year, everything is up in the air—it is a bagatelle whether funding will be received, whether it will be reduced, whether it will be for a year or three years and so on. Nobody can really plan anything with certainty any more.

Mike Harrison: As I am sure the operators told you when you spoke to them, that is a major problem. It is difficult to do any planning when you are not quite sure whether you will have any money or what form it is going to be in. HcL has sometimes had particular types of vehicles supplied by an authority, but the funding might be changed to another form of grant. It is very difficult.

Jackie Paterson: The local taxi card service is run from within the dial-a-journey office. A taxi

card entitles someone to subsidised transport with local taxi firms. I never use that service, but I know a lot of people who do. They phone a different number at the office, which organises the transport. I assume that dial-a-journey takes responsibility for booking the service with the local taxi firms, to save the individual doing it. People just phone up and say when they need a taxi, and the journey is organised.

Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab): You spoke briefly about money, and you indicated that you feel that more funding is required for the services. The way in which community transport is funded has changed. Funds used to be held by central Government, and community transport organisations would bid into them. That changed, and the funds are now held as part of local authority funding. Have service users noticed any changes in the level of service over the years in that respect?

Jackie Paterson: There are constant changes. There is always the threat of redundancies. Some days, there is only enough money to have six buses out. It goes up and down all the time, given the funding issue.

Elaine Murray: Is it worse now that the funding comes from local authorities, or has the problem always been there?

Jackie Paterson: The service that dial-a-journey provides now is nothing like the service that it used to provide. It used to have many more buses and drivers and there was never a problem getting a journey. However, there has definitely been an impact on the service. Those who work for dial-a-journey feel bad about that, as they want to provide a better service for their customers. The financial restraints have made that difficult, however.

Mike Harrison: No comment.

Alice McFarlane: Dial-a-bus is different from community transport, which must find its own funding. People need special training to become a community transport driver, and it costs lots of money to do the training. The problem is not that organisations cannot get drivers; it lies in finding the money to train them.

Elaine Murray: Do you think that that has changed? In your experience, have the users whom you represent found the service to have changed over the years? Has that always been a problem?

Alice McFarlane: It is just getting busier. It is a problem. The bottom line for everything is money. The problem is not getting volunteers—it is possible to train them—but the time that it takes to train them. It would be very nice to have another bus for our community transport in the south-west

of Glasgow, but that would cost lots of money. The buses are well used and are very busy.

Jackie Paterson: Are your drivers volunteers?

Alice McFarlane: Yes, but they still need training.

Jackie Paterson: With dial-a-journey, it is possible for people to book a bus and provide their own volunteer driver, provided that he has been through the minibus driver awareness scheme—MiDAS—training.

Alice McFarlane: Is it?

Jackie Paterson: Yes. We do that sometimes.

Elaine Murray: Alice McFarlane mentioned the need for a new bus. We know from the evidence that we have taken that some community transport organisations are finding that their vehicles are getting a bit long in the tooth and are becoming expensive to maintain and so on. Are the vehicles generally considered to be comfortable? Are they good vehicles to travel in? Are they accessible? It is obvious from what you have said that they are more accessible than certain other forms of transport. Do you or the people whom you represent think that improvements are needed in the standard of the vehicles?

Alice McFarlane: No, my ladies do not complain. As I said, for some of them, the only time that they get to go anywhere is when they use community transport.

Elaine Murray: But they are not complaining about vehicles being a bit old, breaking down and that type of thing.

Alice McFarlane: They might complain to the driver, but they do not tell me.

Jackie Paterson: The dial-a-journey fleet is pretty good and up to date. Obviously, the fleet contains vehicles that are a bit hingin—as we would say—and one or two are perhaps past their sell-by date. Vehicles are replaced, but that is expensive, not so much because of the cost of buying a vehicle, but because of the cost of getting the adaptations done. The vehicles are usually pretty good.

Mike Harrison: We recently bought one or two second-hand buses because the new ones are so expensive. However, I reckon that even the new ones are not as comfortable as a service bus. Given the choice, for a comfortable ride I would use a number 37 bus rather than what is basically a Transit-type van.

Elaine Murray: Is it the size of the vehicle that makes the bus more comfortable?

Mike Harrison: Yes.

Elaine Murray: That is interesting.

Mike Harrison: A lot of the vehicles are getting quite old, but they are well maintained, so they do not break down very often.

Elaine Murray: There is obviously a financial cost for the maintenance that is required to keep them going.

Mike Harrison: Yes.

Jackie Paterson: I suppose that it is just like owning a car—someone can get to the point where they are just throwing good money after bad.

The Convener: Are you aware of any vehicles in your areas that belong to youth groups or other such organisations that are not being used during the day and that could be used if there was more flexibility in the system? Are there buses in the community that are not being used as much as they could be?

Jackie Paterson: The only ones that I know of are local authority vehicles, but with them it is the opposite way round: they are used during the day, but not in the evenings. Offhand, I cannot think of any other organisations that have their own transport that could be used. Perhaps I am just not knowledgeable enough, but I cannot think of any.

Alice McFarlane: I am not aware of any, either.

Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab): How did you find out about the community transport service that you use in your area?

Jackie Paterson: I found out about it because the launch of dial-a-journey coincided with the point at which I stopped working in 1987. There was a piece in a local newspaper about it, and I had met the lady who was involved through some other things that I went to at the time. She was instrumental in getting dial-a-journey up and running. Within a couple of weeks of stopping work, I had booked to go out on dial-a-journey for the first time. I must have been one of the very first customers.

There was a lot in the local newspapers about the service when it started up. Now, of course, everybody knows about dial-a-journey. If anybody joins our branch, we always tell them about dial-a-journey and arrange to get them signed up, which is free, of course. We use the service all the time for transporting people to meetings and going to committee meetings. The buses are well known in our area—we see them all the time.

Margaret McCulloch: Is the dial-a-journey service the only community transport bus service in your area, or are there others?

Jackie Paterson: It is certainly the only one that I know of. Some of the taxi firms have accessible buses.

Margaret McCulloch: So there could be other community transport services available that you do not know about.

Jackie Paterson: I certainly do not know of any. The only other accessible buses that I see going about are the ones that are owned by the local authority to take people to day centres and things like that.

11:45

Margaret McCulloch: I wonder how the other witnesses found out about the community transport service.

Alice McFarlane: I found out by setting up the forum that I am involved with in 2004. The west of Scotland seniors forum—which is, for want of a better phrase, our mother group—was involved with community transport; we found out about it through that forum and have been using it on and off ever since.

Mike Harrison: I cannot remember how I first heard about the service. In this part of the world, people see Lothian Community Transport Services, HcL and South Edinburgh Amenities Group vehicles going about and it is not difficult to find out what they are about and what they are doing.

Margaret McCulloch: Are there people who could be accessing community transport buses but do not know about them? Obviously, you know about them because your various groups are spreading the word, but could the services be better advertised? Going back to Jackie Paterson's comments, there might well be other forms of community transport that you do not know about.

Jackie Paterson: I am sure that there are people who do not know about dial-a-journey; of course, there are people who do not know about a lot of things. You might come into contact with those people through the MS Society; for example, you might get a phone call from someone with MS who has not been out for years. People deal with their diagnosis in different ways; some come to us and say, "I haven't been out for 10 years," or, "I'm not able to go out on my own," and then you tell them about the service and how they can use it. Some people are just oblivious to what is available, but the same is true for a lot of things and applies not just to disability.

Mike Harrison: People in Midlothian probably get to know about these things from Forward MID's directory of services and facilities, which I think is quite widely circulated and available.

Alice McFarlane: I do not think that my ladies think of dial-a-bus as a community service. After all, people have to be over 80 or have a disability

before they can access it, which means that my members who are under 80 years old cannot do so. However, our community transport service lays on shopping trips and all sort of things that my ladies think are just wonderful.

Margaret McCulloch: I know what the answer to this question is before I even ask it, but what effect would the withdrawal of the community transport service have on you?

Alice McFarlane: We would not be able to go anywhere. We would still meet in Brockburn and hear talks by people from different areas, but I would not be able to take anyone anywhere. As I have said, I have taken my ladies to every council facility in Glasgow and beyond over the years, and they think that it is just wonderful that they can get out.

Jackie Paterson: I cannot imagine life without dial-a-journey.

Margaret McCulloch: So it is a lifeline for you.

Jackie Paterson: Yes. This week, for example, I attended my MS Society committee meeting, which I would not have been able to get to any other way, and I have been for my oxygen therapy, which otherwise I would not be able to have. Tomorrow, I am going to the pictures. I could use the service bus to get there, but I would be taking my life in my hands. I know that Mike Harrison likes using it, but I probably do not have the same sense of adventure.

Alice McFarlane: Could you take someone with you, or is that not an option?

Jackie Paterson: Even if I took someone with me, they would have to grab me as I skited across the bus. They would be putting their own life at risk.

Jim Eadie (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP): You have all set out in some detail the benefits of the various community transport services with which you are involved, but do you have any suggestions about how they might be improved?

Alice McFarlane: More money and more buses.

Jackie Paterson: That is basically it: we need more services for more people. Twice a year, I go to Leuchie house for respite, where I meet a lot of people from all over Scotland. I have heard that a huge range of services is available in some places, while in others there is nothing. Some people get one journey a fortnight, while others get no service at all; on the other hand, there are those who are lucky enough to have a service that they call on as many times as they want, as long as the transport is available. If there were a more level playing field and if everyone were able to access community transport, that would be a big

step forward. However, as I have said, we live in hard times and even the existing community transport services are really struggling.

Mike Harrison: Things are probably easier in the cities, because community transport organisations tend to specialise to an extent. SEAG largely deals with the kind of trips that Alice McFarlane's south-west Glasgow group goes on; LCTS does a lot of shopping trips; and HcL does a lot of individual trips for people who cannot use public transport or cannot get into cars. In rural areas, things are much more difficult, because that variety of service is not available. As a result, one community transport service has to try to cover the lot, which means that, as Jackie Paterson has pointed out, a lot of people in rural areas simply do not get any service at all.

Jackie Paterson: Our service covers a huge area; indeed, it practically covers the whole of central region all the way up to Crianlarich, which means that the people who live in the outlying areas have very little chance of getting a journey. It might take a driver an hour and a half to get there and then another hour and a half to take people where they want to go, and sometimes there is just no way that that service can be provided. The people in those areas must be really struggling.

The Convener: I think that you have just highlighted that community transport is very different in different areas and means different things to different people. It is actually very difficult to define.

Alice McFarlane: One size does not fit all; it all depends on the area in question. Our community transport service is taking people to and from hospital because of the changes to hospital transport, which now stops at a certain time and does not operate at other times. If there were no community transport, it would cost people a fortune to get to their hospital appointments or visits and get back again.

Jim Eadie: Are you seeing a rise in demand for community transport because of the reduction in the ambulance service?

Alice McFarlane: Yes.

Jim Eadie: How are you coping with that?

Alice McFarlane: People seem to be coping. As I have said, Margaret Urie would like another bus, but again that is down to finances. I do not think that there is any shortage of drivers who want to go through the MiDAS training to be a bus driver.

However, nothing works if there is no cash and the fact is that everyone is strapped at the moment. As a result, we are here with our begging bowl, hopeful that something will happen. This is a

vastly needed service; we could not say, "If it stopped tomorrow, it wouldn't affect anyone." I hate to think about the number of people in our area alone who would be affected, but when we add the people in other parts of Glasgow, Edinburgh or wherever else the service is used, the number is just too awful to think about.

Jackie Paterson: It would be good to have a better range of vehicles. Dial-a-journey tends to have a lot of big buses that take 12 seated passengers or wheelchair users, but it could have three, four or however many Citroën Berlingos, say, that take just one wheelchair. Quite often, the service runs a big bus for just one passenger. Two or three local taxi firms have these vehicles; as I have said, I was charged a premium for using one, but never mind—I am not bitter. Of course, a big bus will be needed for a school run, a big outing or something like that, but when I use one of them I am usually the only person on it. It seems like a waste having such a big vehicle for one person, although I guess that, after it takes me where I am going, it might be picking up half a dozen schoolkids.

The Convener: As far as hospital visits are concerned, the Health and Sport Committee had a session yesterday on health-related transport, and the evidence that it received will be fed into our report.

As members have no more questions, I thank the witnesses for sharing their experiences with the committee. Your evidence will be helpful when we draw up our report. Thank you again, and I hope that you enjoyed the experience—I know that we have.

Jackie Paterson: It has been good—it was not too scary at all.

The Convener: I briefly suspend the meeting to allow the witnesses to leave.

11:55

Meeting suspended.

12:02

On resuming—

Annual Report

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is consideration of the committee's annual report, copies of which have been circulated. Does anyone have any comments?

Alex Johnstone: It is a very busy report. My only problem with it is that it mentions a couple of things that I could not remember doing. However, once I had had a good think, they came to mind.

The Convener: Do members agree the annual report?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: The committee will publish the report in June. Our next formal meeting will be next week on 5 June, when the committee will hear from the minister about community transport and receive a round-up of the issues that are highlighted in the annual report.

Meeting closed at 12:03.

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