

## **Response to the Infrastructure and Capital Investments Committee inquiry into Community Transport from Voluntary Action Scotland**

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Voluntary Action Scotland (VAS) is the umbrella body for Scotland's network of 32 Third Sector Interfaces (TSIs). We work with TSIs (sometimes composed of Councils for the Voluntary Sector, Volunteer Centres and Social Enterprise Networks) to develop shared intelligence and information so that we can better inform Scottish Parliament, Scottish Government and the statutory sector of the challenges and opportunities TSIs, the local third sector and local communities face. We aim to work with stakeholders to ensure the third sector can play its role in supporting strong and resilient communities.

Community transport is a major issue for the Third Sector. Social enterprise, volunteers and voluntary and community groups are all vital to the delivery of a strong community transport network. TSIs support all of these locally. TSIs and the communities they serve are diverse but a number of common themes emerge. This consultation response is based on their perspectives. TSIs regard community transport as a key issue for the communities they work in and accordingly a number will provide their own responses too.

TSIs in supporting the third sector and volunteering locally will often seek to broker relationships that ensure third sector community transport initiatives are effectively supported. TSIs also play a major role in progressing the RCOP agenda and actively promote the third sector's role in community transport in reshaping care.

VAS can chart a number of common themes across the responses we received from TSIs:

- There has been increased pressure upon community transport providers and networks in recent years but no significant additional investment. The current provision is well utilised and strongly valued by users.
- Community transport provides a lifeline to the communities and individuals who use it, particularly in rural areas where the public transport network may not adequately serve communities.
- Community transport networks are generally disparate in their nature and suffer from a lack of co-ordination to maximise their effectiveness. Some potential users have difficulty identifying what services are available to them and accessing those services easily.
- There is a high volume of volunteer drivers/escorts supporting community transport, both with organised minibus services and one to one driver services. The scale and demand for driving services from the third sector illustrates the high level of community need for transport services, through volunteers and paid drivers. This represents essential social capital building and is potentially sustainable in the long term if properly managed, thus this aspect needs representations in this inquiry.

- Changes to guidelines for transport by the Scottish Ambulance Service (SAS) has had a significant impact upon community transport with SAS effectively reducing their operational hours. There have been concerns raised that this was done without due consideration for community planning and that there was an expectation that community transport would fill the breach, without additional resources. This has again added pressure to community transport.
- Community transport plays a vital role in the 'Reshaping Care for Older People' agenda and must be viewed as central to this programme, particularly in sustaining older people at home for longer. It has to be considered as part of preventative spend and funded accordingly.
- Some TSIs have reported the shift from direct grants from the Scottish Government to providers, to local authorities receiving non-ring fenced funding for community transport has led to a real terms reduction in community transport funding, despite previous assurances to the contrary.
- Vehicle replacement and maintenance can be prohibitively expensive for most community transport operators and action to help mitigate these costs need to be strongly considered. Added to this is the cost of technology to participate in concessionary fares schemes, this can prove a barrier to entry.

A number of suggestions have been put forward to VAS by TSIs to try and tackle the issues they are facing. Whilst this is not an exhaustive list, nor are the suggestions representative of the network as a whole, they do contribute some of the potential solutions and commonalities across the TSI network;

- Introduce a single point of contact for community transport to try and maximise resources at a local level. At the same time community transport should be recognised at the Scottish Government level as a key issue of concern for the third sector. It is important that community transport is recognised as an underpinning concern when thinking about befriending, caring, encouraging and nurturing.
- Community transport hits Change Fund objectives very well in relation to reshaping care for older people and should be allowed greater access to this funding stream.
- Community transport can be part of a solution to the problem of patient transport, if funded and managed correctly and strategically.
- Integrate existing publically owned vehicles, such as school buses, into the community transport network by utilising them when they are not undertaking their primary function.
- One TSI noted "Resources should be sourced to encourage providers to deliver a 'Chair to door' service to enable those who are most vulnerable in our society to continue to engage in social activity, reducing the cost of supporting them to the public sector."
- As mentioned previously by the Committee in this inquiry, the extension of the concessionary travel scheme to community transport would be hugely beneficial. Therefore, access to concessionary fares schemes for community transport operators needs to be re-examined, consideration should be given to greater inclusion in the concessionary travel scheme and 100% re-imburement to operators.

- A number of TSIs noted that simple changes to how public sector partners operate in relation to community transport could make a significant and lasting difference to the ability of community transport providers to support communities. Examples of this from individual TSIs include:
  - Move community transport from one year to three year funding cycles to help for future planning of services.
  - Encourage local authorities to create a clause in grants given to organisations for transport needs to encourage the use of community transport.
  - Create greater transparency in the way local authorities negotiate contracts with community transport operators.
  - Closer working with the NHS and other partners to encourage appointment scheduling outside of peak demand times for community transport providers, easing some of the strain on the community transport network.
  - Encourage local authorities to designate streets on which community transport providers are based as 'priority', increasing accessibility during times of poor weather and helping to make significant savings to the public purse through cutting missed NHS appointments.
  - Create a standard badge for community transport drivers to allow suitable access to NHS facilities, car parks, etc. Some drivers have noted their presence being questioned by authorities due to them not recognising their access badge/pass.

Overall VAS believes community transport is an underpinning issue that if better supported and co-ordinated could improve outcomes for communities and progress some of the ambitions of the Christie Commission towards strengthened preventative approaches, resource sharing and enhancing the role of the third sector.