

The community transport stars gearing up to support the elderly and vulnerable during Coronavirus lockdown

By Christine Boston, Director for Wales, Community Transport Association

When Beverley Mather realised the Dial-A-Ride service she manages could no longer operate due to the coronavirus lockdown, she made an immediate decision.

Her Rhyl-based service usually provides accessible, door-to-door transport for people of all ages who find it difficult to access conventional public transport. With the public now being advised against all non-urgent travel, and the over 70s advised to self-isolate to reduce their infection risk, Dial-A-Ride's modest income and operating model was decimated overnight. So Beverley decided that if the service – a vital lifeline for the elderly and vulnerable - could no longer take passengers to the outside world, then it would help bring the outside world to them.

Over the past few weeks, Beverley has worked tirelessly to help anybody that needs it in her local community. From safely delivering vital food supplies to offering dog walking and picking up prescriptions, she and her team of volunteers have continued to provide a lifeline to people with nowhere else to turn.

Meanwhile, she has had to make tough decisions about the Dial-A-Ride service that has been serving local communities in Denbighshire since 1998. With income and demand disappearing so suddenly, she had to furlough all but two members of staff. In a small team, this was tough – as it is for so many organisations. Dial-A-Ride is a membership-based service, with people paying a small annual fee to access the service. Beverley knows her members well, and realised that many of them would be scared, anxious and in many cases, desperately lonely. She knew how much help many of them would still need.

She reached out to the Trussell Trust and Citizens Advice to see how they, with their fleet of vehicles, could help people access vital services. And she decided to offer a

flexible delivery service, not just for Dial-A-Ride members, but for anybody that needed it. She moved quickly to make sure these services adhered to Government safety guidelines, and that all volunteers could deliver what they needed to safely.

Beverley quickly realised that to provide these new services, and with no income coming in, they would need to pay for petrol somehow. So she took to Facebook to crowdfund, raising hundreds of pounds in a matter of days.

She stood in socially distanced queues to collect over 30 pieces of medication for a single mother with disabled children. She has answered phone calls late at night, from lonely locals looking for a listening ear. She has called regular passengers she knows that live alone for a chat, to make sure they have some human contact in their isolation. Because, as she says, if not her, then who?

Beverley is just one heroine in a growing army of people who are volunteering in their local communities across Wales. Her story is one of hundreds I have heard over the past few weeks, as the community transport movement – one rooted in the communities it serves – has pivoted, seemingly in a heartbeat, to continue providing vital support to the people that need it most.

Community transport has always been about providing flexible and accessible community-led solutions in response to unmet local transport needs. It often represents the only means of transportation for many vulnerable and isolated people, often older people or people with disabilities. As community transport is always run for a social purpose and never for a profit, it is often the most reliable, resilient and accessible way of ensuring the broadest range of transport needs can be met.

In 2017, the Community Transport Association secured £1.1 million to deliver a new project aiming to build a pan-Wales demand responsive transport network.

'Connecting Communities in Wales' is funded through the Welsh Government Rural Communities - Rural Development Programme 2014-2020, which is supported by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the Welsh Government. The project is bringing together transport providers, facilitating partnerships and bringing new initiatives to life. This project is all about supporting operators to realise

their potential for the benefit of local communities. And in the last few weeks, these benefits have become more evident than ever.

The role of community transport in combating loneliness and social isolation, helping people remain independent and access their communities can't be overstated. Coronavirus has meant that within a matter of weeks, people's needs and priorities have changed overnight. Getting people from A to B has temporarily become a case of getting B to A, and social isolation has become a Government-ordered reality.

And that's where the sector I am proud to serve has pulled out all the stops. All over Wales, community transport providers are going above and beyond to get vital supplies to people. Doing this against a backdrop of uncertainty for their services is beyond admirable, demonstrating resilience and a commitment to public service that never fails to humble me.

Because community transport providers know what the people they serve need, they know that there is still shopping to be done. There is still medication to be taken.

As Beverley Mather of Dial-A-Ride says:

"I firmly believe this is a time for everybody in the community to pull together and do what they can, and we are determined to do our bit. We hope by offering our transport and drivers to help get vital supplies to people when they need them the most, we can help people who can't access transport and perhaps don't have a support network."

Beverley's story is one of many fantastic examples of the community transport sector rising to the challenge of the Coronavirus crisis through innovation, generosity and flexibility.

Many different providers across Wales are stepping in to meet the needs of local communities, and although the offer varies in different areas, service with a smile comes as standard.

Anybody interested in accessing these services can find a local provider through the Community Transport Association website on www.ctauk.org and should contact their provider directly.

Author biog

Christine Boston is Director for Wales and UK lead for research and policy for the Community Transport Association. The Community Transport Association (CTA) is a national charity that represents and supports providers of community transport, all of whom provide transport services that fulfil a social purpose and community benefit.