

Connecting communities

Richard Johnstone reports on the funding problems that might lie ahead for some of Scotland's most remote transport operators

FOR a transport service that provides around 2.6 million passenger journeys a year in the UK, describing it as a Cinderella service may undervalue its importance.

But John Macdonald, the director for Scotland of the Community Transport Association (CTA), says that within the context of the transport sector, "community transport is inevitably the Cinderella, and some wouldn't necessarily take it that seriously".

However, he says that the sector needs greater support. "We think it's good to have the ability of local groups to get together to provide a solution to a local problem and it would be good to have a culture of that in which transport funders, and the transport world as a whole, recognise the contribution that we provide and support it positively."

The funding issues are even starker, following the Scottish Government's budget of 14 November, the consequences of which have led Macdonald to fear for the services that the members of his association provide. The concordat between the Scottish Government and COSLA will see funds that were to be allocated to the country's seven Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs) from 1 April being given to local authorities, and not being ring fenced for community transport. If 31 March is financial crunchtime for community transport operators, then this Cinderella could turn into a pumpkin.

"For the last two years, one of the key sources of funding for community transport was the Scottish Executive or Government as of now, which had two funding pots, one called the rural community transport initiative (RCTI), and the other called urban demand responsive



John Macdonald

transport, which funded pilot projects in four cities.

"We've been used to that environment for the last few years and if you're setting up a body, it's quite clear who you should go to."

Following the proposed changes in the structure, with funds to go to the RTPs, the sector was beginning to adapt, Macdonald says: "All through this year, our members were working hard with RTPs, building up relationships, and the relationships were pretty good.

"However, the concordat between the Government and COSLA has thrown all this in the air, because it was one of the ring-fenced bits of funding which is now to have that ring fence taken away and be allocated to local government for local priorities, to do with as they will."

He is fearful of the consequences: "At this point in time, our members had hoped to know what the budgets with the RTPs were for next year, and to be working on, from this point, mid-November through to March, plans for next year.

"All that, in the past week, has been

thrown out, and now the local authorities are going to be the key source of funds if the concordat is ratified by the local authorities, so at this time, things are up in the air, really, for community transport, we're uncertain as to what's going to happen."

This uncertainty, he says, will continue until the CTA knows which councils will ratify the concordat.

"There are some groups whose funding runs out in March who would be normally getting word round about now about carrying things forward from 1 April, so we don't know what's going to happen, but it might affect these services. There are 2.6 million passenger journeys within our environment each year and now the goalposts have completely moved and we have to deal with 32 local authorities, and we have to rely on them being supporters of community transport.

"I know of at least 17 projects, in different parts of rural Scotland, whose funding is running out on 31 March, and [they] would have been looking to renew funding under the old RCTI scheme, so they're the most vulnerable ones."

He admits he is disappointed that the CTA wasn't consulted, but adds: "It's clearly just pure politics. We've been caught up in the deal that's been arranged between [the] Government and COSLA to freeze council tax, in exchange for the loosening of ring-fenced funds towards local government, so yes, disappointing [...] this late in this financial year to have had the bolt out of the blue, but it's politics."

Macdonald said that community transport has been growing since bus deregulation in 1985, and the Scottish Government's funding has had an impact on the development of a service that is important to some of Scotland's remotest

communities, and its frailest citizens.

“What you’re talking about is no more than £2.5m a year, but the Government has really been getting a lot of bang for their bucks for that £2.5m, which is a drop in the ocean in the great scheme of things for government, but it’s been leading to an awful lot of good, and it’s been a critical initial source of funds to help to lever in funds from other areas.”

Macdonald adds that Scotland’s geography makes community transport especially critical. “In the rural areas, there are no bus services or where there are services, they’re paltry. Commercial operators can’t make the profits that they need within these areas, and community transport is often the only solution to the need within those areas. If you look at the UK, proportionately, there’s probably a higher level of community transport in Scotland than in the whole of the UK.

“But to be honest, we think, even as it stands, we’re only scratching the surface of community transport’s potential. We know we provide 2.6m passenger journeys every year, what we don’t know is how many people don’t know about community transport, because there isn’t a service or because they can’t access it.

Our hunch is that the people for whom our members provide a service is only a fraction of the potential. You’ve got a growing elderly population in this country too, therefore, the expectation would be that there would be an even greater demand for community transport services in the years to come.”

If Macdonald represents the concerns of his almost 200 members, and worries about realising the potential of community transport, his concern is echoed by some local authority transport officers. One, David Summers, the team leader on public transport for Highland Council, says that, although he was confident of the capacity of local authorities to take on the responsibility, he wonders about the funding.

“If we take the RCTI responsibilities, that’s well and good if the money’s there to go with it, and that’s the big unknown at the moment. I would be surprised if we got the same [total] money as is being spent on the sector at the moment, we might, if we’re lucky, get the same amount for the council but there’s £450,000 [in Highland Council’s region] that’s not council responsibility so it’s very likely we will have to make cuts that will affect people

in rural communities.”

The sector will watch and await budget negotiations at both Holyrood and local levels, but looking beyond that, Macdonald would like to see the possibility of concessionary fares being introduced to community, as well as public, bus services.

“That’s one of our key issues in Scotland. Many people, even here in Edinburgh, can’t use these [concessionary] services, and they have to use community transport services, which, in most instances, you have to pay for it.”

Finance and Sustainable Growth Secretary John Swinney has already said he would examine the potential of extending the scheme.

“It is up for review,” Macdonald said, “so amongst the discussion and consultation which will take place that would be our main point. We think there’s something discriminatory about it that the frailest and the most disabled people can’t use their concession on the mode of transport which addresses their needs best, so when the review of the concessionary fares scheme takes place next year, we would push for it to include community transport.”

Making progress

Richard Johnstone reports that the regional transport strategies could soon get the green light

SCOTLAND waits, perhaps not on tenterhooks but the country is awaiting the approval of the seven regional transport strategies (RTS) from the Transport Minister Stewart Stevenson, who took on the role of approving the strategies, which had been received by his predecessor in March, when he took office.

Although Scotland’s Regional Transport Partnerships are not holding their breath, Councillor Fraser Macpherson, the chair of Tactran, the RTP for Tayside and Central Scotland and a member of Dundee City Council, says that, “we see progress, certainly”.

“I think we’re certainly heading in the right direction with that, I think it’s a matter of weeks rather than months, I think that’s quite clearly the impression that we

were given by the transport minister.”

However, partnership director Eric Guthrie says they’re not “marking time”.

“We’re already procuring some work on developing what you might call the sub-strategies.” These sub-strategies, which cover areas such as buses, walking and cycling, park and ride and travel information, outline the work that will be taken forward over the life of the strategy, with a delivery plan for the strategy’s 15-year life, and a business plan for the first three years of the strategy – 2008/09 to 2010/11 – detailing what will be taken forward in this timeframe, of which Guthrie adds: “we would envision having that largely completed by the end of the financial year.”

While there has been no break for the partnership as it awaits the approval of

the strategy, Guthrie recalls that there was a “huge amount of work within a fairly concentrated period” to develop the strategy.

He says: “Tactran is slightly unique in the sense that, of the so-called model one partnerships – Tactran, Hitrans, Nestrans and Sestrans – we didn’t actually have any heritage of voluntary regional transport partnership working.

“We came together as a group of authorities for the first time in this way in December 2005, and one consequence of that was that we had a little bit of work to do in organising the infrastructure to develop a regional transport strategy. So what actually happened was we were compressing that 12-15 month process into, effectively, nine months.”

Given that the partnership had not

had the background of being a voluntary organisation, Guthrie says there was “a very positive response, right from the beginning” to the creation of the partnership.

“The general feeling was that there was a very positive reaction to the idea of a Regional Transport Partnership, and how the benefits of what’s happening in parts of the four council areas could be rolled out across the region, whether that’s in public transport, whether that’s in relation to freight or other transport issues, and I think also critically, people seeing the benefits of working regionally upon things like engaging the transport industry to try to provide better public transport to address the issues of congestion, and also, how we can look at improving our public transport network generally.

“Broadly speaking, that was always positive, and in terms of the consultations that came back at the end of the consultation, roughly 75 per cent responded, ‘we think you’ve got the right strategy for the region, we think you’ve got the right objectives in your strategy, and we think that the interventions that you’ve put in your strategy are the right solutions to the issues that you’re trying to address’, and that seemed to be thoroughly consistent. With any strategy, you’ll have people who are more enthusiastic than others on aspects of the strategy, but in broad terms, that seemed to be something people were welcoming.”

Guthrie says that he: “tend[s] to refer to Tactran as ‘RTP central’ in Scotland, because we do sit there at the heart of Scotland, you’ve got effectively a crossroads in the shape of A90-M90 and the A9-M9, they cross over in relation to access north and south of the Central Belt, and that applies equally to rail, so that again is an issue for us in terms of the movement through the region and how we deal with that, relative to the movement that’s going on within the region.”

On the interventions or actions that are planned in the strategy, Guthrie says that 30 of the 79 are projects of a national significance, and he adds: “We have lobbied into [the Strategic Transport Projects Review] process and we will want to engage with Transport Scotland, sometime, hopefully, in the New Year, as to how many of these projects they believe are relevant to the STPR on an ongoing basis.”

One of the key issues relating to public transport provision is TERS, the Tay Estuary Rail Service, which, Guthrie says, “is, in a sense, adding value to some of the

proposals that the rail industry have got and looking at increasing the frequency, particularly from Arbroath across the region through Dundee through Perth, through Stirling and on towards Glasgow.”

He outlines the advantages of this scheme, which would “encourage people to use public transport in preference to the car in journeys, and we also think that helps to address some of the capacity problems and constraints in the national rail network, particularly in and out of Glasgow.”

“We also think it will help to address issues that are no doubt on the horizon relating to events in the not too distant future, like the Ryder Cup in 2014 at Gleneagles, and also now, the recently announced Commonwealth Games in Glasgow. All of that, we think this proposal can help to address and we believe that the proposal can actually deliver a number of local, regional and indeed, national benefits for the rail network.”

The proposal has been looked at before, and is about to undergo a refresh under Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance. Guthrie adds that: “on the basis of what, admittedly, are early discussions with the rail industry, at this stage in time, we believe there is not a significant amount of additional infrastructure required. We think that the main cost is likely to be in the shape of rolling stock but the studies we are about to procure, with the involvement of the rail industry, will have to answer some of these questions.”

Tactran is a partnership already looking to the future, at implementing the RTS once it gets its hands on an approved version. Fraser Macpherson, who by his own admission didn’t have a transport background before he was elected as chair in June, can see the potential for the partnership.

“I do see an exciting future for Regional Transport Partnerships and I am very keen to be part of that, and I’ve been pretty impressed with the very positive level of discussion at the Tactran board thus far, and representatives, not just from the four councils but the expertise that the non-councillor members bring as well, it’s been pretty positive, obviously, with challenges lying ahead.

“I’m very keen to do this because I think it’s very apparent to someone who represents citizens in Dundee, which has very constrained boundaries, how important it is to work in a wider regional context, to move forward a lot of the transport issues in the Tactran area.” ■

Expert group recommends engineering solutions to blackspots

Turning around Scotland’s road safety record will require the development of engineering solutions to remove blackspots from our roads, an expert group on road safety said.

Transport Minister Stewart Stevenson chaired the first meeting of the group, which was brought together to advise on steps that can be taken to reduce the number of tragedies on Scotland’s roads.

At the meeting, the group also advised that action to change driver behaviour and improve education would be required to improve the country’s road safety record.

Heathrow matters to Scotland, says UK Transport Secretary

Transport Secretary Ruth Kelly announced a consultation on the options for increasing capacity at Heathrow Airport and stressed to people in Scotland that its decline would have an impact on the nation’s jobs, business and travel choices.

The consultation, Adding Capacity at Heathrow Airport, considers whether a third runway could be built at the airport, served by a sixth terminal with access to the road and rail network. This would enable the airport to handle around 700,000 flights a year.

Nearly three million passengers a year arrive at Heathrow to catch a connecting flight to other parts of the UK. More than 500,000 people a year fly from Glasgow to Heathrow and then connect with an international flight, with 490,000 doing so from Edinburgh and 280,000 from Aberdeen.

Kelly said: “Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and other main regional airports also gain from Heathrow’s position at the centre of global routes. International businesses say the range and frequency of direct flights into Heathrow and the ease of connection onto airports like Glasgow is a powerful factor in decisions to base European operations within the UK.”

Plans for new Tay bridge go on display

Proposals for a new foot and cycle bridge over the River Tay in Perth are to go on display to the public in Perth and Scone, as voting begins to decide whether the project will get a major financial boost.

Sustrans, the sustainable transport charity, is heading a bid to the Lottery for £50 million which would fund 79 projects across the UK, including the Perth bridge, which would link Scone to Perth for the first time.

The public are being asked to vote to decide whether Sustrans, or one of three other organisations, will win the money. Each will be profiled in an ITV show with Sustrans’ being shown on 4 December. On-line voting has started at www.thepeoples50million.org.uk.