

Community transport threat: Licence changes could force Dial-a-Ride services to fold

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Vital bus services relied on by the elderly and vulnerable in Shropshire are being placed under threat.

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Manager of Shrewsbury Dial-a-Ride Linda Cox and driver Terry Price have warned it could be 'dire' for its service

New rules could force volunteer drivers for services like Dial-a-Ride to gain a commercial licence, a process that would cost thousands of pounds.

That means services that currently provide a lifeline to thousands of people in our region would have to be scaled back or could fold altogether.

From pensioners who live a long way from a bus stop to those who are physically unable to catch public transport, community transport groups offer a much-needed service in Shrewsbury, Oswestry, Ludlow, Church Stretton, Broseley and Bridgnorth with a fleet of 26 mini buses ranging from eight to 16 seaters.

Consultation

The Department for Transport is carrying out a consultation to determine whether drivers need to be reclassified as commercial drivers and undertake additional training at a cost of thousands of pounds.

Due to the rurality of the county, community bus services offer a much needed link to the outside world for people cannot use public transport and would otherwise become isolated.

Since the DfT launched the consultation, community bus operators have been in talks with Shropshire Council to find a way they can still offer their services.

And Shropshire Council is now considering setting up a scrutiny committee to establish a way forward.

In a report to members, officer James Willocks said: "The proposed DfT Section permit consultation has brought into doubt the future of many community transport groups.

"The consultation centres on the interpretation of whether these groups operate for a profit or their primary function is transport.

"If that is the case, and the latter is for most, then they would be required to apply for a transport operators licence or relinquish the current commercial contracts resulting in a shortfall in operating costs.

"This will have a significant impact on community transport in Shropshire, with most groups finding the funding for these requirements prohibitive.

"The community transport sector currently has the ability to raise additional funding by providing contracted services for Shropshire Council or any other agencies with any surplus being used to offset the costs of their voluntary operations.

"The outcome of the consultation will have a direct impact on the sector and should as a result the groups be unable to supplement their revenue income with contractual work, alternative sources of funding will need to be identified.

"Should alternative funding not be identified there is a real possibility that many of the groups could make the decision to cease to operate."

Concern

Linda Cox from Shrewsbury Dial-a-Ride said that if the Department for Transport chooses to implement the changes then it could be 'dire' for all of the community transport groups across Shropshire.

She said: "We are working very closely with Shropshire Council to try and develop a solution. There is growing momentum nationally to get the Department for Transport to understand the impact this could have across the board."

Michelle Kelsall from Qube Oswestry has 400 members who use the service on a regular basis.

Although the service has two commercial drivers who already have licences, if new changes are brought in all 30 drivers would be required to have a commercial licence.

She said: "We are not a commercial outfit. We are here for the community. There are two sides to this.

"On one hand other commercial operators want to be on a level playing field with us while on the other community transport groups need to find ways of funding themselves.

"We get grants but they don't cover our running costs. We are in limbo, but we have to keep going as people rely on us. We have got to keep people moving."

Heather Osborne, chief executive of Age UK Shropshire Telford & Wrekin, said: "We are very concerned about the proposed changes and the impact that will have on the lives of older people, many of whom are isolated if they are unable to access community transport services.

"This could potentially have a negative impact on some of our services, for example our day centres."