

Wigan & District Community Transport

For many years, Wigan and District Community Transport (W&DCT) has been running fully accessible minibuses for use by voluntary and community groups in Wigan and the surrounding area. As a non-profit making organisation providing low cost accessible transport, its minibuses are fully equipped with lifts for wheelchair users, have low steps and conform to all current safety standards.

Its management committee members are all volunteers, acting as trustees of the registered charity and directors of the company limited by guarantee. They meet regularly to oversee the organisation's affairs.

W&DCT's fleet of eight minibuses is available for community and voluntary groups in the Leigh, Wigan and surrounding district. There are seven 16-seater minibuses, and the largest is able to carry up to six passengers seated in their wheelchairs. The vehicles are four VW LT46s, a Mercedes Sprinter, a Mercedes 0609 and an LDV Convoy. The other vehicle is an 11-seater Peugeot Boxer that can carry up to two wheelchairs. In a full year, W&DCT expects to provide about 40,000 passenger trips. It also has an effective vehicle replacement system, having bought two new vehicles out of reserves and fundraising in the last two years.

W&DCT trains the groups' volunteer drivers, through the Community Transport Association's MiDAS Scheme; without MiDAS accreditation, you are not allowed behind the wheel. The MiDAS assessment currently costs £50, but this is under review. The driver must be over 21 and less than 70, and hold a clean, current, full driving licence with a D1 entitlement. People who passed their test after 31/12/96 do not have the automatic



Doris Alkirk boards the minibus at the Tesco store.

D1 entitlement on their licence, but can drive a 16-seater minibus on a voluntary basis, but not as part of their job.

W&DCT actively encourages people to volunteer to help provide services to the community. In return, volunteers get a varied experience and training opportunities. In its literature, W&DCT

only a small grant of £8,000 from Wigan Council, to help meet the wages of W&DCT's Manager, David Jones.

New directions

In 2006, W&DCT's management committee decided to look into new ways of securing their organisation's future. Third Sector Enterprises (3SE), a Manchester-based social enterprise support and development company, obtained funding from the Coalfields Regeneration Trust to support new social enterprises in Higher Folds, Leigh. This programme has benefited W&DCT by providing it with skilled technical support and assistance throughout the last year.

Twelve months later, the investment of everyone's time and money is beginning to reap rewards. In the first instance, W&DCT has had the results of a survey of the transport needs of local schools and voluntary organisations. Besides suggesting ways that W&DCT could provide additional services, the survey also led to W&DCT establishing an accurate database of 1,500 existing and potential members.

In the last year, detailed work on W&DCT's financial structure has provided David Jones with a new quotation system on his laptop computer, that enables him to submit well-crafted tenders for public sector accessible transport services. The Trustees have insisted

that these tenders must cover all costs, so that the core community transport work is under-pinned and secured for the future. So far, W&DCT has nearly doubled its annual turnover, by winning two competitive tenders. One contract has been awarded by Wigan Council, and is a home-to-school service for children with special educational needs. The other is for the Hindley Local Link, a demand-responsive service contract awarded by Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Authority.

Now W&DCT wants to establish a training unit, to provide a wide range of driver and passenger assistant training courses. This will be operated under the auspices of a wholly-owned trading company that is being set up, called WCT Social Enterprise Ltd.

Hindley Local Link

On 29th October 2006, Wigan & District Community Transport began operating a brand new demand responsive transport (DRT) service, the Hindley Local Link, serving the Hindley, Pennington Green and Aspull area in Wigan. In November, its first full month of operation, it carried 650 passengers, so it is proving very popular.

The new Volkswagen LT35 minibus is wheelchair accessible and



The Hindley Local Link brochure.

reminds potential recruits that they will gain new skills, meet a wide range of people, gain vital experience in the workplace and receive expenses to cover their travelling costs.

All of this is being achieved with



David Jones.

operates on a door-to-door basis. It was paid for by Wigan Council from the town's Transport Infrastructure Fund. Passengers can book up to a week or as little as one hour in advance. David Jones, Manager, says: 'Wigan & District Community Transport is very proud to be operating this service on behalf of

Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Authority.'

Wigan Councillor Audrey Bennett, Wigan spokesperson for Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Authority, has urged people to give Local Link a go and spread the word about it: 'We need it to be well used



One of the volunteer driving team at Wigan Pier.

to guarantee its long term future.' Early indications though are that passengers love it. Aspull resident Susan Kindred said: 'I used to get the bus to work but the times didn't always suit me. Now I can get picked up from work and taken home at a time that's right for me. It's a great

travel, but can book their journey up to one week in advance. The service operates Monday to Saturday from 08.00 to midnight, and Sunday 11.00 to midnight, considerably longer hours than the 609 bus service that it has replaced.

'We are not for a moment suggesting all buses should be replaced like this,' David Jones says. 'It is just that, in an area like this, DRT can be the way forward, carrying more passengers than would be possible with a traditional low frequency stage carriage service. Don't forget we can take people into Wigan, where passengers can, if they wish, be dropped at our town's busy bus station to make onward connections.'

Passengers can use Local Link for all types of journeys including work and leisure, which is ideal if they do not have access to a car or a main public transport service. On the day our photos were taken, the service picked up Mrs Doris Alker with her shopping from the local Tesco and took her home. Mrs Alker has lived for over 46 years in the

Stationmaster's House, on Hindley Railway Station, where her late husband was the last Stationmaster.

Mrs Alker used to travel on the 609 bus service, which Local Link has replaced. Although it was not heavily used, she wondered whether anyone had the right data, as she reckoned bus tickets were not always issued. 'I used to say I should bring a cushion, as my nearest bus stop had no seat other than the garden wall of the house next to the stop. Of course,' Mrs Alker added, 'We used to have a 10-minute service to Wigan, years ago, but today they have built brand new houses on the bus turnaround.'

Fares have been kept low and range from £1.50 single and £2.50 return for local journeys to £2/£3 for journeys to Wigan. Concessionary fares of 30p/50p for local journeys and 50p/80p for journeys to Wigan apply.

The service operates using three Zones, shown as pink, green and blue on the publicity leaflet. GMPTE has produced thousands of leaflets

to let people in the Local Link area know how to use the service and where they can travel to. With the

in Salford, Gorton and Wythenshawe) and by private operators. Local Link runs alongside



Passenger Frank Rimmer being collected at Pennygate Medical Centre by driver Paul Fisher.

assistance of its new database, W&DCT was able to tell all its member organisations in the Hindley area about the new service too, and there seems little doubt that this helped to get the service off to a good start.

There are now GMPTE branded Local Link services all over Greater Manchester, run both by community transport organisations (for example,

the door-to-door Ring and Ride service, whose eligibility rules mean its services are restricted to people with mobility difficulties.

By Richard Armitage

Richard is an independent transport consultant, and has been providing technical assistance and development support to Wigan & District Community Transport.

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A happy customer; Doris Alker in front of the Stationmaster's House on Hindley Railway Station, where she has lived for the past 46 years.

service.'

Passengers wishing to book a journey or wanting to know more call 08456 05 55 05 between 08.00 and 20.00. They are asked to phone at least one hour before they want to