



Scottish Disability
Equality Forum

Survey of the Service of

Order of Malta Dial-a-Journey

Conducted 2004 - 2005 by

Scottish Disability Equality Forum

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ORDER OF MALTA DIAL-A-JOURNEY

Foreword

The Scottish Disability Equality Forum (SDEF) was delighted to be asked to conduct this survey.

Our organisation exists to promote social equality and is dedicated to working with people affected by disability and all those who can contribute to the progress of this ideal. We are determined that the voices of people with disabilities should be heard and should guide the decisions that affect their lives.

This study was principally carried out with the people who matter and who know the first-hand reality of living with disability – the customers of Dial-a-Journey themselves. We received excellent co-operation from the Board, management and staff of that organisation, who welcomed the opportunity to be subjected to independent scrutiny. They wanted a ‘warts and all’ appraisal and were keen to find areas for improvement.

The report contains many statistics: but more importantly it contains the authentic views of those for whom a well run community transport service can make a difference. Their evidence is compelling, showing how the quality of life for people with disabilities can be transformed by providing access to the same facilities most of us take for granted.

We commend Scottish Ministers and the Scottish Executive for supporting this work. The Scottish Disability Equality Forum believes in policy being determined by the upward flow of information and that people with disabilities take control when they make their opinions heard. This report gives expression to their experience and we urge policy makers and operational staff to take heed.

Ron Skinner MBE
Convenor.

REPORT

This is a report of a survey conducted on the service delivery of Order of Malta Dial-a-Journey during 2004 and early 2005. The work was undertaken by the Scottish Disability Equality Forum (SDEF) on behalf of the Mobility Access Committee for Scotland (MACS).

The Committee advises Scottish Ministers on the transportation needs of people affected by disabilities and raises awareness of transportation opportunities among people with disabilities.

SDEF is a user-led membership organisation open to all disability organisations and to individuals with any kind of impairment. It is dedicated to furthering the social inclusion agenda, through the removal of barriers and the promotion of equal access for all people affected by disability.

Social inclusion begins with unhindered access to community life and the same opportunities enjoyed by others. Transportation is a key feature. SDEF was pleased to carry out this examination of the service provided by a community transport organisation: firstly, to note where its service might be improved and; secondly, to consider whether the model employed might serve as a template for others. In short, our remit was to investigate whether Dial-a-Journey provides a service which is reliable, affordable and accessible and which reduces social isolation? Below we offer an analysis of how well it performs.

Methodology

An appendix is attached containing a copy of the questionnaire used and a fuller statistical breakdown of responses. However, here we provide a brief description of the way in which the survey was conducted.

In late October 2003, Dial-a-Journey circulated a letter from SDEF to its members, indicating that the work was to be undertaken and inviting participants to respond directly to SDEF.

A total of 540 letters were issued, this figure representing the full membership of Dial-a-Journey at that time. Over 300 replies were received, with 191 respondents indicating their willingness to take part in a structured personal interview. Of these, 137 (72%) were women and 54 (28%) were men.

In the section on the geographical area served, an analysis is offered of the population spread. In selecting people to take part in the interview, SDEF sought to ensure a representative sample from the area's rich urban and rural mixture. Whilst this could not exactly match the demographic pattern, we believe a reasonable cross-section was achieved as set out in the appendix. A total of 78 people were consulted, of whom 59 (76%) were women and 19 (24%) were men.

The questionnaire was divided into three parts. The first asked brief questions about the individual, this largely to establish age and the nature and severity of the person's disability. All participants were assured that the information would be treated in strict confidence and would only illustrate trends, rather than personal circumstances. All indicated they were happy to reply on that basis. In some cases the interview was conducted with the carer, depending on the personal circumstances, preference and convenience of the service user.

The second section sought to establish the ways in which the individual used the range of services available and their knowledge of the various options. This was to establish the extent to which Dial-a-Journey made people aware of the facilities offered. It was also intended that the questions would reveal whether patterns of usage were, in part, determined by the current operational policies of the organisation.

The third section dealt with the degree of satisfaction which people felt with the service. It looked at the ways in which Dial-a-Journey engaged with its customers and examined: the standard of information exchange between the operator and service users; the means by which bookings are made; the helpfulness of staff, both within the office and on the service vehicles; levels of satisfaction with the service's cost, punctuality, accessibility and comfort; and, crucially, the difference which the facility makes to the customers' quality of life.

Interviews took around one hour and were conducted in the participants' homes. A member of SDEF staff asked the questions and recorded the answers. Many of the questions were open to "yes" or "no" answers, or asked service users to choose between perhaps four options. This was to aid collation. However, there was also a general 'comments' section to allow complete freedom for interviewees to add positive and negative observations as they saw fit.

Executive Summary

In later sections we look in detail at the pattern of responses, draw fuller conclusions and present some recommendations. However, there were a number of clear and consistent findings which highlight the areas highly regarded, or widely disliked by customers. The extent to which the latter are necessary operational features, or simply poor procedures, will be examined below. The evidence showed:

- 85% of customers described their satisfaction with the service as very high (62%) or high (23%)
- 85% of customers considered the service to have a very positive (60%) or positive (25%) impact on their quality of life
- 91% of customers considered the drivers were always polite and helpful
- 91% of customers considered the drivers could not do more to assist their passengers
- 79% of customers believed that Dial-a-journey did not advertise its services very well (47%) or badly (32%)
- 75% of customers considered the three day advance booking system to be inconvenient
- Of those who expressed an opinion (71% of those asked) 73% felt it unfair that regular travel could not be booked in advance

Geographical Area

Dial-a-Journey operates in the area formerly served by the Central Regional Council and now covered by the unitary authorities of Stirling, Falkirk and Clackmannanshire.

The total area is 1024 square miles and the population is 282,000¹, comprising: 86,370 in the Stirling Council area; 147,460 in the Falkirk Council area and 48,240 in Clackmannanshire.

848 square miles lies within the Stirling Council area. Here, the City of Stirling (population 31,500) is the largest urban area, followed by the nearby towns of Dunblane (8,300), Bannockburn (7,000) and Bridge of Allan (5,200). The extensive rural hinterland is characterised by small towns, the largest of which is Callander (3,100) and a plethora of villages, the smallest of which has a population of 28. The overall population density is 102 per square mile.

The Falkirk Council area occupies 114.8 square miles, but is more heavily populated with an average density of 1285 people per square mile. The largest town is Falkirk (population 32,400), followed by Grangemouth (17,900), Bo'ness (13,900), Stenhousemuir (10,300), Denny (7,300), Polmont (5,400) and Bonnybridge (4,700). The area is characterised by industrial developments, although much heavy industry has declined in recent years.

Clackmannanshire Council area is 61.2 square miles and population density is 788 per square mile. The largest conurbation is Alloa & Sauchie (population 18,100), followed by Tullibody & Cambus (7,400), Tillicoultry and environs (6,300), Alva (5,000), Clackmannan (3,300), Dollar, (2,700) and Menstrie (2,000).

In Scotland 79.8%² of the population are considered to be adults, ie 16 years of age and over. It is reasonable to estimate, therefore, that there are approximately 225,000 adults in the area covered by Dial-a-Journey.

¹ Mid 2004 Population Estimates Scotland – General Register Office for Scotland

² Census 2001 - General Register Office for Scotland

The Scottish Household Survey (SHS) of 2001/2 estimated that around 18.5%, or just under one in five adults in Scotland has a disability and/or a long-term illness. We may, therefore, infer that there are around 41,600 adults in those categories in the territory under consideration.

About Dial-a-Journey

The roots and subsequent development of Dial-a-Journey can be traced to: the identification of a specific need; the marshalling of local resources to provide practical remedies; co-operative working between a range of individuals and statutory and voluntary bodies; and adherence to the principle of user involvement.

History

The lack of suitable community transport in the area was first noted around twenty years ago by the Margaret Blackwood Housing Association. To overcome this, they approached the then Central Regional Council to explore the foundation of a dial-a-ride service. The Order of Malta charitable organisation became involved, agreeing to provide vehicles: the maintenance of these was, however, to be met by passenger fares.

The Council gave support for the employment of a Manager and the enterprise got underway in 1986 under the auspices of the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) Community Programme. At this point there were two mini-buses and the area served was the heavily populated south east of the Region.

In 1988 the MSC discontinued its support, the local authority agreeing to provide funding for the office base and staff. Three years later Order of Malta Dial-a-Journey Ltd became an independent company and the area of operation was extended to the whole Central Region. The local authority also agreed to increase its financial support.

In 1996, upon disaggregation, the Central Regional Council was replaced by unitary authorities in Falkirk, Stirling and Clackmannanshire. They maintained support for this valuable local facility, the financial contributions being split: Falkirk 50%, Stirling 35% and Clackmannanshire 15%.

From its simple beginnings, the organisation has grown from a two vehicle concern to one employing 28 staff and operating a wide range of services, as detailed below.

Structure

The composition of the Board of Directors exemplifies the collaborative approach through which Dial-a-Journey has developed. Four of its twelve members are 'User Directors', including the current Chairperson; three represent the Order of Malta; three are Councillors (one from each unitary authority); and two are Council officials.

The General Manager is supported by an Operations Manager and a Senior Co-ordinator. The bookings for the various services are handled by five Co-ordinators and there are twenty Drivers. Being a driver training organisation, all but one of the office staff could also drive if called upon.

Operational Scope

Dial-a-Journey offers a range of services which are briefly noted below:

Mini-Buses

The service operates every day of the year except 1st January (and is heavily subscribed on other public holidays including Christmas Day). Passengers may travel between 7.30 am and 11 pm on weekdays and between 9 am and 11 pm at the weekends. The last pick up is at 10.30 pm. Travel outwith these hours may be arranged at extra cost.

Dial-a-Journey carries passengers within the three unitary authority areas formerly covered by the Central Region. It is a membership organisation open to people with mobility problems of any kind resident in, or visiting, the area. Being subsidised by the three local authorities, people holding bus passes are required to surrender them upon becoming members. People wishing to travel outwith the area may do so at extra cost, this price reflecting the loss of subsidy at the local authorities' boundary.

One carer may travel with a passenger, the cost being £1 per trip. Should space allow, additional carers may be carried at full fare. Carers must be picked up and alight at the same place as the passenger.

Customers' fares are calculated by reference to zones and vary from £2 to £7 depending on the distance travelled. A person, for example, living in Bo'ness in the south east of the area would pay the minimum, Zone 1, fare when making a journey within the town. A trip to Falkirk would cross the boundary into Zone 3 and accordingly cost more: Stirling would fall under Zone 6 and be priced more highly: while a trip to Tyndrum on the north western boundary of the area would be calculated as Zone 12 and incur the maximum fare.

Bookings are taken by telephone, the line being open from 9 am to 4 pm on weekdays and from 9 am till noon on a Saturday. Customers should book up to three days in advance of travel. Although it is possible to book right up to the day of travel, this greatly diminishes the chance of a request being successful. Sometimes a person with a flexible timetable can be accommodated at short notice and people may also be offered cancellations when a booking is withdrawn.

Once a booking is accepted the service provided is door-to-door, the drivers assisting the passengers into the vehicle, securing them and ensuring their comfort. Wheelchairs are fastened to locking attachments within the vehicle by means of straps. Assistance is also provided with baggage. If a return trip is required, the driver will arrange to pick up the passenger at a given time and place. The driver will also take the fare.

Excursions

During school holidays there is considerable spare capacity. The organisation has, for a number of years, offered customers the opportunity to take part in day-trips to a range of popular destinations at those times. Trips originate in Stirling, but passengers from further afield can be brought in through a feeder service. A programme is drawn up each year, with input from User Directors and leaflets prepared. Towns visited include Anstruther, Largs and Troon, with fares varying between £6.50 and £10. Carers travel for half price.

Taxicard

The three unitary authorities each operate concessionary schemes offering a £2 discount from normal taxi fares. All are administered by Dial-a-Journey through two dedicated telephone lines. One is for a same day service and is open from 9 am to 10 am Monday to Friday. The other deals with advanced bookings and is open Monday to Friday from 9 am to 4 pm and Saturdays from 9 am till noon. The taxis themselves operate at all hours, seven days a week.

Taxicard is for members, there being over 3000. The more ambulant Dial-a-Journey members may from time-to-time be encouraged to take advantage of this service, thus liberating the specialised support facilities offered by the mini-bus service for those most requiring them.

Self-drive Group Hire and Individual Hire

This service derived from a recognition that many voluntary bodies required access to reliable, serviced vehicles at reasonable rates. From 1992, a small proportion of the fleet was dedicated to this use, as the overall number of vehicles grew. Following disaggregation of local authorities in 1996 and the reduction in some statutory provision, demand increased again. As more vehicles were acquired, the provision was also extended to individuals, this development occasioning the purchase of two smaller 'chairman' style vehicles. The total fleet available for self-drive hire is currently eight.

MiDAS Training

The company is part of the Community Transport Association's Mini-bus Driver Awareness Scheme (MiDAS). The programme ensures that all those driving such vehicles are aware of disability issues, safety concerns and legal requirements. A number of Dial-a-Journey drivers have become accredited driver assessor/trainers and have assessed Dial-a-Journey staff and those hiring self-drive vehicles.

This service has also been extended to a number of voluntary bodies and disability awareness training has been given to taxi drivers in Stirling and Falkirk. In the former, successful completion of such training is a condition of licence. Provision continues to expand, those driving mini-buses for Stirling and Falkirk Councils also receiving MiDAS training. The organisation also offers instruction on Passenger Assistance and Mini-bus Evacuation.

Dial-a-Shopper

This service is offered in conjunction with Central Shopmobility, which has bases in Stirling and Falkirk where people may borrow wheelchairs. It is predicated on the idea that many people who are going to the major shopping areas may do so on a co-ordinated basis and in a multi-occupancy vehicle. The reduction in need for separate mini-bus provision is reflected in decreased fares for this service. The wheelchairs are on the spot and are provided free of charge. Shopmobility also has a dedicated vehicle which tows a container with wheelchairs, for the use of shoppers, to other venues, such as Alloa and Grangemouth.

WAVE

Wheelchair Accessible Vehicle Enterprises Ltd (WAVE) was formed by the Order of Malta in 2001 as a wholly separate commercial operation. It offers private hire services in vehicles ranging up to 31 seats and has also won contracts to operate the 'Trossachs Trundler' bus service and the 'Clackmannanshire Rural Rider' service. To ensure no conflict of interest when competing for contracts, the Board of WAVE excludes both elected and professional representatives of the three local authorities.

Profile of Customers Interviewed

As stated in the 'Methodology' section above, a total of 191 people responded positively to our request for an interview, designed to discover customers' views of Dial-a-Journey's services. This was more than one in three of all members and was most appreciated. A little over 40% of those who replied affirmatively were interviewed.

While it is not possible to say with certainty that they are completely representative of the membership, it seems likely that such a large sample reflects the composition quite accurately.

SDEF endeavoured to question people from all locations and in rough proportion to the total numbers available for interview in each area. We would enter a couple of caveats. Firstly, while it might appear from the statistics in Appendix 2 that some large areas are underrepresented, addresses in certain larger conurbations include adjacent smaller communities, eg St. Ninians, Stirling; or Camelon, Falkirk. Secondly, it was necessary to interview at least one person from certain small areas, while statistically the true representation should have been less than a single person.

As noted above, the gender composition of those interviewed was roughly the same as those replying. Below are listed some key features which give a snapshot profile of Dial-a-Journey's customers. Of those interviewed:

- 76% were women and 24% were men
- 55% were over 65 years of age and 45% were under 65
- 64% lived in a town or city¹, 32% in a village and 4% in the countryside
- 12% had a sensory disability², 86% had mobility problems, 18% had a chronic illness and 9% had a mental health problem³

¹The figures are combined as Stirling has city status

²Sensory disabilities can also affect mobility

³People with multiple disabilities cause the figure to exceed 100%

- 72% were in receipt of Disability Living Allowance (Mobility) with 59% on the high rate and 13% on the low rate¹
- 69% were in receipt of Disability Living Allowance (Care) with 33% on the high rate, 28% on the medium rate and 8% on the low rate
- 27% were in receipt of Attendance Allowance with 19% on the high rate and 8% on the low rate
- 13% were in receipt of Incapacity Benefit
- 22% were in receipt of other benefits

These figures confirm that around three out of four Dial-a-Journey customers are women, more than half are over 65 years of age and 99% are either in receipt of Disability Living Allowance or Attendance Allowance. Nearly three out of every five are in receipt of Disability Living Allowance (Mobility) at the high rate and more than one person in three lives in a village or rural location.

Patterns of Usage

Every person questioned used the mini-bus service, to a greater or lesser extent. The following figures refer to that element of the service. Half indicated they used the service fortnightly or more and two out of three said they used the service monthly or more. This may be broken down:

- 5% used the service at least four times per week
- 15% used the service twice per week
- 19% used the service weekly
- 10% used the service fortnightly
- 17% used the service monthly

¹ Disability Living Allowance continues for those over 65 if they were already in receipt on their 65th birthday

Clearly, for many, Dial-a-Journey is a vital part of their regular routine. Even for those who use the facility on a less regular basis, such as Mrs A in a case study below, the service provides an important element contributing to overall quality of life.

For the majority of interviewees (55%), Dial-a-Journey was their principal source of transport. Some had the additional opportunity to make use of a secondary source, such as the car of a relative. However, for many (45%) there was no access to private transportation.

Exactly 50% indicated that they had used the service for five years or less. In some cases they had become aware of Dial-a-Journey as their condition deteriorated and the company had assisted them from an early stage of their disability. However, others reported that they had been disabled for many years before they had heard of the service and regretted not being in touch sooner.

The subject of advertising is discussed below. However, in assessing whether the Dial-a-Journey model could be of wider assistance, both locally and in other parts of Scotland, one need only imagine the consequences of withdrawal of the service from existing customers. With more than half relying on the facility as the mainstay of their mobility and nearly half having no access to private transport, the effects would be most damaging. Taking the evidence of the Scottish Household Survey that 18.5% of adults in Scotland have a disability and/or a long-term illness, the case for the expansion of community transport is compelling.

Just under a half of respondents (47%) indicated that they typically used the mini-bus service for journeys of under five miles, while around three out of four (74%) employed it for trips of less than ten miles. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority tend to use the service in the mornings (62%) and afternoons (65%), with the typical pattern of travelling out in the morning and home in the afternoon accounting for the statistics being in excess of 100%.

The most common purpose of travel was shopping (40%), followed by social visits (31%). Later we discuss the impact of the three day advance booking system on the pattern of usage. However, it seems that the use of Dial-a-Journey as a 'hub and spokes' operation occurs quite spontaneously. People tend to think of it as a means to travel into and out of town and tend not to use it for shorter trips in their immediate neighbourhood, albeit people, for example in the remoter parts of the area, could use it for more localised travel.

Only 26% took part in Dial-a-Journey excursions. This could in part be attributable to poor communication, as 27% of interviewees had not heard of the facility. Others felt they could not participate, as they were unaware they could be transported to Stirling to commence an outing. Many of those interviewed, however, suggested that they would make further enquiries, as the opportunity to take part in such excursions would be a welcome social and recreational boost.

Only 32% of interviewees stated that they used the taxicard service. For many, cost was a decisive factor, with the system appealing more to those in urban areas, where a £2 discount made a significant difference to the overall cost of a trip. For those in rural areas the discount was a negligible consideration.

When asked to compare the various merits of the taxicard and mini-bus services, the latter also scored far more highly for vehicle access, sense of safety and assistance from the drivers. In the last category, 76% considered the mini-bus drivers superior, 24% felt there was no difference and 0% rated the taxi drivers higher.

The vast majority of those questioned tended to use the mini-bus service within the area of the three unitary authorities. 27% had hired the service to travel outside the area and most of these had only done so rarely. A typical journey might have been to Edinburgh, Glasgow or to commence a holiday at a regional airport. Nearly all such journeys had involved a Dial-a-Journey driver rather than self-hire.

Of those questioned, few (17%) had used any other Dial-a-Journey services, besides those noted above. This may be because few were affiliated to organisations which make use of group hire facilities. However, as with many of the categories, the pattern of usage was partly determined by access to information about available services. All were existing members of Dial-a-Journey, but many were unaware of the diversity of opportunity already open to them. The organisation should consider means to communicate better with customers, to improve the take up of its diverse facilities.

Satisfaction Levels

Advertising

When asked how they had first become involved with Dial-a-Journey, only 9% indicated they had come across the service through any advertising material and around 4% felt they had read about the organisation in a newspaper. The vast majority (60%) had heard about it through professional advice, particularly from medical staff, or had become aware of the service from seeing the mini-buses themselves. The remaining 27% had been informed by friends or colleagues.

Extrapolating from the Scottish Household Survey figures on the prevalence of disability and/or long-term illness, we may infer that there are more than 41,000 adults so defined in the area served. Whilst not all would necessarily require the assistance of community transport, the figure contrasts sharply with the total membership of Dial-a-Journey of 540.

It appears that the service does not make great efforts to advertise either its range of services to existing customers, or its availability to potential customers. It may be worth noting that the enterprise is heavily subsidised, the actual fares contributing only 1/6 of the true operational cost. There may, therefore, be a perverse incentive to maintain, rather than expand, current service levels. The company is to be applauded for its development to date, but may have entered a 'comfort zone'.

Customer Contact

Booking

Dial-a-Journey takes bookings for its mini-bus service on a single telephone line, which is open from 9 am to 4 pm on weekdays and from 9 am to noon on Saturdays. Customers may call up to three days prior to travel: lines therefore tend to be busy from 9 am as reservations are accepted on a first-come first-served basis. This policy is scrupulously observed and people in small villages will undoubtedly take priority over customers in urban areas, should their call be taken first.

While 60% of respondents indicated their calls were answered quickly (38%) or within three minutes (22%), a significant number found they had difficulty getting through. They noted that it was necessary to dial and redial over a lengthy period and felt this compromised their opportunity to secure the booking of choice.

The advance notice booking system will be addressed separately below. However, telephone booking itself may present some problems which could be resolved.

It is impressive that the Co-ordinator is able to take calls, establish whether a request can be accommodated, calculate journey times, plan viable routes and accept reservations. There would clearly, be a difficulty in synchronising two or more operators, should additional telephone lines be provided. However, it might be possible to examine typical patterns of usage over a given period, calculate the capacity required in specific localities and have separate lines for calls from different areas. Alternatively, two operators might be able to work harmoniously, given access to a co-ordinated computer system.

A second issue is the glut of calls received at 9 am. While the rush may be unavoidable, Dial-a-Journey may consider that, given the trips will not take place for several days, perhaps opening the phone lines from 10 am might be better suited to the circumstances of their clientele. Many disabled people take a while to prepare themselves in the morning and the current system may favour those with carers, or those in residential accommodation.

Treatment

Once through, customers noted high levels of satisfaction with the courtesy and helpfulness of office staff. This was noted as being present: 'always' by 74%, 'usually' by 17% and 'sometimes' by 9%.

Interviewees also had very high regard for the efforts made to accommodate their requests, with 62% feeling that staff always did their best to assist them. A further 22% reported this usually happened, 17% that it sometimes occurred, while only 5% felt that these efforts were not often made.

Although there was a widespread feeling, therefore, that staff were extremely helpful, this was not necessarily mirrored in achieving bookings of first choice. Only 32% reported that they always succeeded in making a suitable arrangement and a further 47% that they usually did so.

It appears that those with the greatest flexibility are best placed to obtain an acceptable booking, while those who must travel to arrive at a specific time are the most vulnerable to disappointment. Once again, this may call into question the rule of, 'no more than three days notice'.

A second feature of the responses is that, whereas people considered the staff helpful, this was not reflected in the answer to a question on whether Dial-a-Journey would propose alternatives, in the case of failure to achieve a first choice booking. Of the sample in this category, 60% said alternatives were only suggested 'sometimes' (23%) or 'not often' (37%). This could reinforce the view that those with flexible timetables, necessarily do better: it might also suggest that the initiative currently needs to be taken by the customer. If this were so, Dial-a-Journey might consider more proactive assistance to callers.

66% of interviewees were aware that Dial-a-Journey has a system whereby unsuccessful callers may be offered a cancellation. In our survey, 38% had been offered a cancellation at some time, 54% had not and 8% could not recall. Bearing in mind that most people are successful in securing appropriate bookings and that suitable cancellations are not necessarily forthcoming, the figure noted of 38% of the sample does seem to imply Dial-a-Journey makes a significant effort to contact people when cancellations occur.

Advance Booking System

For normal travel, this system operates as previously described, namely booking can be made no more than three days in advance. Later calls may lead to success, but this is far less likely. Passengers may also make two advanced bookings, no less than a calendar month prior to travel.

These arrangements were considered inconvenient by 75% of those interviewed and gave rise to the most consistently adverse remarks in the 'comments' section. It was also by far the single feature of the service that most would wish to change.

By contrast, it was agreed by 64% that the system was fair. This was, however, an endorsement of the intention rather than the effect. Many respondents also felt that fairness could equally be served by a system with greater practical merits.

It was felt that this provision distorted the pattern of usage by reducing spontaneity, indeed making it almost impossible to respond to a late invitation, or a sudden urge to visit or shop, or a need to make a medical appointment at short notice. In this way it reduced social inclusion by removing a feature of life most people take for granted.

A second frustration was that it made attendance for appointments somewhat hit and miss. Most people make such arrangements less than a month and more than three days in advance: however, Dial-a-Journey customers must wait until 9 am, three days before travel, to attempt to secure a booking amidst the early morning rush. It may be recalled that 71% of passengers indicated that they mainly used the service for shopping (40%) or socialising (31%). The awkwardness of making bookings for pre-arranged appointments may be determining and limiting the way people use the service.

It would appear that the system has evolved and been retained because it broadly works. However, there seems to be no preconceived operational requirement for the notice of travel currently required.

There is a case for considering reducing time scales for both the one month a three day systems. Dial-a-Journey should review with staff the possible implications of reducing the former to one week. It is hard to envisage what imperative there is for a calendar month's notice and it is recommended that the organisation looks at this again. It is also suggested that the company should explore whether 48 hours or 24 hours notice would create practical difficulties with scheduling and consider revising the timescale downwards.

A further area of concern was the inability of customers to book regular travel. In the sample, around 30% had no desire to do so: however, of the remainder, 73% considered it unfair that such arrangements were ruled out.

The rationale of the company is that block booking travel for the same day for a given period runs counter to the principle of 'first-come first-served' and reduces the opportunities of the ordinary customer to secure a booking. On the other hand, it may be said that the rule militates against people participating in classes, courses, voluntary work, therapeutic work, club activities or scheduled recreation.

There is a fine balance to be drawn and it may be that the greater good is served by current arrangements. However, it would be useful if a limited experiment were carried out by the company to see if a small number of such bookings had an adverse operational effect.

Currently, co-ordinators are able to schedule journeys spontaneously as calls are received: they could equally accept bookings around a fixed number of pre-arranged trips. A second concern, that people might be remiss in notifying the end of a regular arrangement, might be managed by charging fares to those who transgress.

Drivers

The company's drivers came in for almost universal praise. As has already been noted, 91% of interviewees considered they were always polite and helpful and, in response to a second question, the same number noted that they could not do more to help passengers.

Most customers had had experience of a wide number of different drivers, yet suggested that the standard was uniformly high. It was remarked that they were always patient, unhurried and pleasant and were willing to assist with message bags and trolleys when appropriate. Many people remarked that their friendly manner was part of the attraction of travelling with the service, while some carers noted that they had enormous confidence in drivers to take charge and relieve them of their duties for the duration of the journey.

Vehicles

72% of passengers considered the mini-buses to be comfortable. Amongst the remaining 28% the problems noted were poor suspension on some of the older vehicles and hard, narrow and closely raked seats. The front step could also be a little too high.

The mini-buses carry people with a variety of disabilities, yet 92% of interviewees considered the vehicles to be well adapted to their needs. The only adverse points were that occasionally a smaller vehicle might suit better: and for excursions, it was remarked that luggage space is limited and a vehicle with a toilet might be considered.

Interviewees were asked if they considered that the mini-bus liveries drew attention to the passengers' disabilities. Only 5% were concerned, the remainder not considering the issue (42%) or being undisturbed by it (53%).

Routes

Being a shared door-to-door service, questions were included to discern whether people felt the routes could be overly circuitous. 93% of respondents reported that the routes chosen were fair to everyone. 90% also noted that they were personally convenient.

It is unavoidable that occasionally a person will be delayed as other passengers are dropped off: however, some respondents actually drew attention to the pleasant social element and the opportunity to see a little of the countryside.

Costs

There was a general feeling that the current fare structure is quite reasonable. 3% considered the costs much too high; 16% believed them to be a bit too high; 62% felt they were about right; and 19% regarded them as generous. Some noted that the fares were particularly reasonable when taking into account the door-to-door nature of the service and the assistance rendered by drivers.

In the section above on 'Patterns of Usage', people appraised the various merits of the mini-bus and taxicard systems. It was noted that for people in rural communities, there is a considerable comparative cost advantage to the former. Respondents also considered that vehicle access, sense of safety and assistance from the driver were superior with the mini-bus service. Dial-a-Journey should be aware of these considerations when signposting callers to one service or the other. The cost differential can be quite significant and we would urge that passengers are not unnecessarily penalised.

When asked about the fares for carers, the pattern was roughly as above. Nobody considered the £1 to be much too high; 8% suggested the fare was a bit too high; 57% indicated it was about right; and 35% noted that it was generous.

As the service is subsidised by the three unitary authorities, people with bus passes must surrender them when becoming a member of Dial-a-Journey. This is designed to avoid people receiving two subsidies from their local council. 55% of the sample expressed a view on this: 56% of them suggesting that the policy was fair and 44% considering it unfair.

Although the majority were content, others considered this policy to be an unfair burden for people with disabilities. Able bodied pensioners are entitled to free travel, while those using Dial-a-Journey are charged. This was seen by some as discriminatory. Dial-a-Journey and the unitary authorities should consider introducing a further concession to the fares charged to members of pensionable age, or allowing them completely free travel.

Punctuality

The levels of satisfaction were high in this area. 65% considered the service to be always punctual, 32% believed it usually was and 3% felt it sometimes was. Given the way in which routes are scheduled by co-ordinators as the telephone requests are received, this is particularly praiseworthy. Drivers also manage to create a sense of calm, unhurried efficiency.

Feedback

It appears that Dial-a-Journey does not seek much formal feedback on its services. Only 17% reported that they had been asked to comment on provision.

Interviewees were also asked, however, if they felt that their informal comments and feedback to service personnel were acted upon. Just under 60% of the sample responded and, of these, 78% suggested that they were confident their remarks were noted and effected change.

A question was included on whether passengers were aware of Dial-a-Journey actively improving its services. 53% felt that it was and 7% did not know. However, of the 40% who answered "no", many qualified their answer by stating that they had only been aware of a very high standard from the outset.

For those who answered affirmatively, fleet updates were most welcome as the newer buses were quite superior to the older models. One loss noted by some, was the dropping of a self-drive caravanette which had previously been available for holiday hires.

Quality of Life

Community transport can most properly be judged by the changes it effects to its passengers' quality of life. The yardstick must be the extent to which a service facilitates enhanced social inclusion for people affected by disability.

Interviewees were asked to express their level of satisfaction with the service. The result was that: 1% rated this as 'low'; 14% estimated it as 'moderate'; 23% noted it as 'quite high'; and 62% reported their satisfaction as 'very high'.

The concluding question invited respondents to describe the impact of Dial-a-Journey on their quality of life. 3% said the service was 'not particularly important' for them; 12% suggested that the facility was 'occasionally helpful'; 25% regarded the service as 'positive' and adding to their quality of life; while 60% declared the service 'very positive – a vital help'.

Equality begins with access: in its fullest sense this means access to opportunities to participate completely in the life of the community. Passengers taking part in the survey gave a wide variety of frank responses to a range of questions. In certain areas there was widespread praise for elements of the service offered by Dial-a-Journey, while in others reservations were expressed, or potential improvements suggested.

60% of passengers consulted found that Dial-a-Journey provided a vital element, opening the door to mobility and helping develop their independence. The service can take heart from this conclusion, but also consider the first hand evidence of their customers in planning how to increase the figure.

CASE STUDY

MRS A

Mrs A was speaking as the carer of her husband.

“I suppose that we may not be typical users of the service, but perhaps our experience can tell you something about Dial-a-Journey.

We moved to the area from Glasgow about ten years ago and started using the service shortly afterwards. My husband has had Multiple Sclerosis for around twenty years and we were not aware of any comparable community transport near our former home.

You may call us “niche” users, as we have our own car, but use Dial-a-Journey every couple of months for particular journeys. The kinds of things I have in mind are trips where parking is difficult, or if we have an appointment to visit say, a lawyer, or the optician.

We are lucky in that we can take advantage of the one month notice priority booking system, as we normally have reasonable notice of appointments. However, I would say that you have to have a good memory to remember the day to make the call. I wonder if this could be reduced to one week. Also the three day booking system can be a bit tricky.

The service from the drivers is fantastic and the social aspect of travelling in the mini-bus is a real bonus. Most important though is the fact that we can be delivered to the door, unstressed, not dishevelled and with dignity. I would like to add that, as a carer, I find the whole process gives me a break: I travel with my husband, but know that we are in the very capable hands of the driver, who does everything for us. I can drive, but I can appreciate that for non-driving spouses, this must be superb.

On the negative side, I feel that some of the mini-buses used do have poor suspension and that, sometimes, perhaps a smaller vehicle would be better. However, to put this in perspective, let me recount a story which shows what a great service Dial-a-Journey provides.

On one occasion, my husband and I were returning from a holiday in Canada and had arranged to be picked up by Dial-a-Journey at Glasgow airport. As sometimes happens, our flight took longer than expected and we felt more and more alarmed as this built up to about one and a half hours. We were working out what we could do in Scotland to get home, fully expecting that the mini-bus would be needed elsewhere.

We needn't have worried: the driver was aware that the arrival time had slipped back and had phoned Stirling to keep the office informed. They worked out that they could handle the situation and told him to wait for us anyway. We were met at the carousel and the driver escorted us straight to our front door – all at no extra charge.

I feel the costs in general are very reasonable and all the drivers have been excellent. Although we don't wholly rely on the service, we find it really opens up possibilities for us and adds tremendously to our quality of life."

CASE STUDY

MRS B

“I became ill about twenty three years ago with what I now know was Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (ME). I won't describe all the features, but what seemingly started as bouts of very severe flu, left me with a range of symptoms including extreme tiredness, occasional disorientation and feelings of 'vagueness', anxiety, aches, weight loss and feeling very cold.

At that time, I was living in Renfrew, but moved to this area about eleven years ago. For a while I was unaware of Dial-a-Journey and have only used it for around four years. At first, this was fairly sporadic, but I have now reached the stage of using it perhaps twice a week.

I would say that my experience of Dial-a-Journey has been very positive overall and it has helped me in a number of ways which, perhaps, you wouldn't normally associate with a mini-bus service.

I used to work as a librarian but, as you can imagine, ME caused fairly radical changes to my life style. I believe that access to Dial-a-Journey has helped me, in a step-by-step way, regain confidence and social interaction. Obviously, I have received a lot of medical assistance over the years but, at a time when broadening my horizons was both possible and therapeutic, Dial-a-Journey helped me restore some independence.

Things have gradually built up and I now use the mini-bus to go to church, to shop and to socialise. 'Independence' for me means having the choice to come and go as I please, without relying on somebody else to take the initiative. I have grown in confidence and can also say I have great confidence in the service, particularly the drivers. They are extremely helpful and will always take time with me and assist with my shopping trolley.

A second and perhaps unexpected way in which the service has helped is that it allows us to live out of town. I feel that, without a service this good, we would have to consider carefully whether we might have to move closer to the facilities of an urban area. My husband works quite a lot overseas and, without my current level of independence, this might be more problematic.

Of course nothing is perfect and I would say that the booking system is a little difficult for me. 9 a.m. isn't my best time of day and I would guess that many people with disabilities feel the same. However, despite the time it sometimes takes to get through, I normally get a booking. This may be because I am pretty flexible about when I can travel and I don't mind arriving a little early when meeting someone.

I am also a little disappointed that people can't book regular travel for the same days: this stops me taking classes. However, on the brighter side, I feel my opportunities broadening. I am a member of a book club at present and look forward to maybe travelling further afield in the future. I would rate the service very highly and feel it has had a very positive effect on my quality of life."

CASE STUDY

DRIVER C

“In many ways I feel it is wrong to use the term ‘driver’ as this implies somebody making a delivery. I really feel that this doesn’t describe our role.

I first became involved about seven years ago when I moved to this area. I had previously run my own business and was looking for a complete change. Having been intrigued by the sight of the many Order of Malta Dial-a-Journey mini-buses going about, I was really pleased to see an advertisement for a job and applied.

In the intervening years I have never regretted a minute and feel that the job has helped me develop as a person. I also hope I have brought something of myself to the work. I have always felt myself to be fortunate and have also wanted to give something to others. That isn’t patronising, it’s just a desire to pay in when you feel you have been lucky yourself.

There isn’t really a typical day. You may be assigned to a school run and then find yourself going to Crianlarich, Falkirk or Strathblane. One of the delights of the job is that you get to know the passengers and develop strong relationships. They can be enormously entertaining and sometimes you have to be fast just to keep up. I hope they look forward to their trips and am sure they realise their company is really valued.

It would be unforgivable to go into work in a bad mood, but on those occasions when you feel a bit down, the passengers can give you a real boost. Sometimes I feel there must be some mistake that I am being paid: a wet night in winter, or a summer’s evening in the Trossachs both have their appeal.

For a while I was a MiDAS trainer and quite enjoyed it; but at the end of the day, the classroom is no substitute for the personal contact with passengers. What I always used to tell people in training sessions was, “treat the passengers as though they were members of your own family”. The handbook tells you so much, but after that it comes down to dealing with people in the same way as you would want somebody to treat your mother.

Although I feel the work may appeal to people with a particular disposition, my colleagues all have quite different personalities and bring a lot of life experience to the job. There is a lot of camaraderie and people do tend to stay a long time. I am sure the rewards I find in the job must also be there for the others.

I have done a number of jobs and, as I said, have run my own business. However, in my current role I have never had that awful 'back to work' feeling. The only times I have felt low are when a passenger passes on. I would say over the years many customers have become friends.

The only other downside? Well occasionally I get a noisy bus, or have to drive with the window open on a hot day, so miss out on some of the chat. Apart from that, there must be something right with the job: I haven't looked at the vacancy columns for seven years.

Acknowledgements

The Scottish Disability Equality Forum is indebted to all those who kindly took part in this survey. We would also like to express our gratitude to all those who responded to our first request for participants, but whose testimony was not included in our sample. More than one in three members of Dial-a-Journey generously volunteered to participate and SDEF was most impressed by this positive reaction.

We should also like to thank the Board, management and staff of Order of Malta Dial-a-Journey for their whole-hearted participation. All offered unstinting support to the enterprise and sought to give an open and comprehensive insight into the company's operations. Particular thanks are due to the drivers who allowed the researcher to spend time observing the service at first hand and to the office staff who explained their procedures and systems.

SDEF is also most grateful to the Scottish Executive Development Department for its support and encouragement in undertaking this work and to Scottish Ministers who, through the Mobility Access Committee for Scotland (MACS), commissioned it. We trust the survey will be of assistance to their deliberations on the development of community transport in Scotland.

APPENDIX 1

COMMUNITY TRANSPORT INTERVIEW

Number _____

Section 1 – Personal Details

GENDER

Male _____ **Female** _____

AGE

Under 65 _____ **Over 65** _____

SETTING

City _____ **Town** _____ **Village** _____ **Rural** _____

PHONE

Yes _____ **No** _____

DISABILITY

Sensory _____ **Related to Movement** _____

Caused by Chronic Illness _____ **Associated With Mental Health** _____

BENEFITS

Disability Living Allowance (Mobility) **High Rate** _____ **Low Rate** _____

DLA (Care) **High Rate** _____ **Middle Rate** _____ **Low Rate** _____

Attendance Allowance **High Rate** _____ **Low Rate** _____

Incapacity Benefit _____

Other Benefits _____

Section 2 – Service Usage

PERIOD

How long have you been using Dial-a-Journey? _____

CARER

Do you have a carer (family member/friend) who regularly travels with you? ____

MAINSTAY

Is Dial-a-Journey your principal source of transport? _____

ALTERNATIVES

What other transport do you use?

Private (specify) _____ **Public (specify)** _____

REPLACEMENT

What transport has Dial-a-Journey replaced?

Private (specify) _____ **Public (specify)** _____

FREQUENCY

How often do you use the service? (specify frequency eg [x2 per week])

Daily _____ **Weekly** _____ **Monthly** _____ **Other (roughly)** _____

DISTANCE

What is a typical, one way, journey length for you (in miles)?

Under 5 _____ 5-10 _____ 11-20 _____ Over 20 _____

DESTINATION

What is your most frequent destination? _____

PURPOSE

What is the principle purpose of regular travel?

Shopping _____ Social _____ Medical _____ Other (specify) _____

TIME

What is your most frequent time of travel?

Morning _____ Lunchtime _____ Afternoon _____ Evening _____

SERVICES

Which of the following do you think is operated by Dial-a-Journey?

Excursions _____ Self-drive _____ hire _____ Driver
Training _____ Taxicard _____

Door to Door Mini-buses _____ Group Hire for Voluntary Agencies _____

EXCURSIONS

Do you take part in Dial-a-Journey excursions? _____

NUMBER

If 'Yes', how often per year (roughly)? _____

TAXICARD

Do you use the Taxi Card service? _____

FIGURE

If 'Yes', how often per month (roughly)?

AFIELD

Apart from excursions, do you ever hire the service to go out of Central? _____

DRIVER

If 'yes', does this also involve hiring the driver? _____

EXTRA

Have you, or a group you belong to, used other Dial-a-Journey services? (specify if 'Yes')

Section 3 – Satisfaction with Service

INFORMATION

How did you hear of Dial-a-Journey?

Leaflet _____ Newspaper _____ Colleague _____ Other _____

ADVERTISING

How do you feel Dial-a-Journey advertises its services?

Very well _____ Quite well _____ Not very well _____ Badly _____

ANSWERING

How would you assess the telephone answering system?

Normally immediate or fast _____ Usually through in 3 mins. _____

Sometimes difficult to get through _____ Often difficult to get through _____

COURTESY

Do you consider the office staff to be polite and helpful?

Always _____ Usually _____ Sometimes _____ Not Often _____

ACCOMMODATION

How often does Dial-a-Journey accommodate your requests?

Always _____ Usually _____ Sometimes _____ Not Often _____

EFFORT

Do you believe Dial-a-Journey tries hard to accommodate your requests?

Always _____ Usually _____ Sometimes _____ Not Often _____

ALTERNATIVES

If Dial-a-Journey cannot include your request, will they suggest an alternative?

Always _____ Usually _____ Sometimes _____ Not Often _____

CONVENIENCE

Do you consider the three day advance booking system to be convenient? _____

FAIRNESS

Do you consider the three day advance booking system to be fair? _____

ADVANCED

Do you think it fair that you can't make advance bookings for regular travel? _____

CANCELLATIONS

Are you aware that you can sometimes get a booking when someone cancels? _____

CONTACT

Has Dial-a-Journey called you to offer you a cancellation?_____

POLITE

Do you consider the mini-bus drivers to be polite and helpful?

Always _____ Usually _____ Sometimes _____ Not Often _____

ASSISTANCE

Do you feel mini-bus drivers could do more to help you? (specify if 'Yes')_____

COMFORT

Do you consider the vehicles to be comfortable? (specify if 'No') _____

SUITABILITY

Do you consider the vehicles to be suitable for your needs? (specify if 'No') _____

ROUTES

Do you feel that the routes are designed to be fair for everyone? _____

COURSE

Are the chosen routes mostly convenient for you? _____

FARES

Which of the following do you feel is accurate? The current level of fares is:

Much too high ____ A bit too high _____ About right _____ Generous _____

COSTS

The current cost of travel for carers is:

Much too high ___ A bit too high _____ About right _____ Generous _____

PUNCTUALITY

Do you consider the service to be punctual?

Always _____ Usually _____ Sometimes _____ Not Often _____

OPTION

Is the Taxi Card system a viable alternative for you? _____

ALTERNATIVE

Would you describe a taxi service to be better or worse in these respects?

Cost _____ Vehicle Access _____ Flexibility _____

Sense of safety _____ Assistance from driver _____

BUS PASS

Is it fair that you have to give up your bus concession to use Dial-a-Journey? _____

FEEDBACK

Has Dial-a-Journey formally asked you to comment on its services? _____

COMMENTS

Do you feel your informal comments to staff are acted upon? _____

IMPROVEMENTS

Do you feel that Dial-a-Journey is actively improving its services? _____

PROFILE

Have you ever felt the buses draw attention to the passengers' disability?

No _____ Yes but don't mind _____ Yes and it is embarrassing _____

CHANGES

If you could change one thing about Dial-a-Journey, what would it be? _____

SATISFACTION

How would you describe your satisfaction with the overall level of service?

Very high _____ Quite high _____ Moderate _____ Low _____

LIFESTYLE

How would you describe the impact of Dial-a-Journey on your quality of life?

Very positive – a vital help _____ Positive-adds to my quality of life _____

Occasionally helpful _____ Not particularly important _____

APPENDIX 2

Home Locations of Interviewees

Aberfoyle	1
Alloa	6
Alva	2
Balfron	1
Banknock	3
Bannockburn	4
Bonnybridge	1
Bridge of Allan	7
Callander	2
Camelon	7
Cornton	1
Crianlarich	1
Denny	5
Dollar	1
Doune	5
Dunblane	2
Falkirk	3
Grangemouth	4

Larbert	1
St Ninians	6
Stenhousemuir	1
Stirling	8
Strathblane	1
Tillycoultry	2
Whins of Milton	3
TOTAL	78