

Achieving sustainable CT

– The Northumberland Approach

A year ago I reported on a conference I attended at Choppington in Northumberland where all the various agencies and providers of CT came together under the direction of Richard Armitage of Richard Armitage Transport Consultants to try and determine a framework for establishing sustainability for community transport operation across the county, (Issue 906, 23 February 2007). I have recently attended a second Choppington conference to see how the plan has developed. This was a truly high level conference sponsored by One North East, Defra, the Northumberland Strategic Partnership and Northumberland County Council. It brought together CT operators, local authorities and agencies at both County Council and District Council level and Government agencies. If you've ever been involved in trying to get that level of attendance together in one room, and I have, you will know how difficult it can be. That it was achieved showed just how important they all felt the matter was; no less than 93 representatives signed up to the project. The CT operators, local authorities and the NHS now have to show they



Brokerage schemes for minibuses means that they are fully utilised and represent best value.

difficult to achieve any economies of scale or for groups to work together.

The aim of the Northumberland project was to ascertain all the providers of CT in all their various forms, all the available vehicles, the identified CT need, however big or small, the various agencies that have a transport need which could be met all or in part by CT and most importantly all available potential funding. It is a massive project because the very nature of CT means that often groups can be very small and set up to meet a very specific need. Because of that they tend to be very insular and fiercely protective of their status, often erecting large metaphorical fences around their activities and tolerating no interference.

Part of the project was to break down those barriers, so that there could be better understanding of the requirements and the services available, and also because there was an underlying wish to raise the standards of CT across the County, as well as achieving better usage of vehicles and skilled staff.

Because of its disparate nature and because there is little law surrounding the establishment of CT, standards vary widely. Many CTs are extremely well run, as good as many commercial

operations, but equally some are very poorly run. Another aim of the programme was to raise operating standards across the board to acceptable levels.

As if this programme wasn't complicated enough, the county was also facing the upheaval of a Government proposal to move to a Unitary

Authority instead of the current situation of County Council and district or town councils. That meant that whatever programme was eventually established had to be robust enough to work either with the current situation or with a new unitary authority set up. This was well judged because as it turns out Northumberland is to become a Unitary Authority.

The Joint CT Strategy

Over the last year everyone has worked extremely hard to develop a

cohesive strategy and the conference at Choppington was the culmination of that work with the presentation of the draft strategy. Northumberland County Council actually began this process in 2004, with the publication of a CT strategy defining the Council's policy and programme delivery for CT, but because in the



One of the new vehicles being operated by ADAPT was purchased with an NCC grant. It is a Mercedes Sprinter converted by Minibus Options.

can rise to this challenge by making an appropriate response.

Northumberland perhaps represents all the worst scenarios for CT. It is a very large county, it is very rural and it has only small pockets of urban development, all of which are divorced, by considerable distances from each other. This makes it



Coverage includes small vehicles as well as more conventional minibuses. This is a wheelchair accessible Citroen Berlingo operated by Bringo.

intervening years the importance of the CT sector has become more widely recognised and the capability for joined up delivery has become more important and under greater pressure, there was need for a new strategy.

The aim of the strategy was to define the joint commitment and activities of all stakeholders in Northumberland who have an interest in CT as well as to ensure accountability to the population and build widespread understanding of why CT is needed. It also focused on action and expenditure by presenting evidence on the needs and ways of improving accessibility of services to the target groups. Also explored were the means of managing resources including staff, time and money, thus ensuring effective co-ordination of activities.

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The stakeholders were defined as transport operators including, not only CT organisations, but taxi operators and commercial bus operators; the NE Ambulance Service Trust; Northumberland Strategic Partnership together with Local Strategic Partnerships and Belonging Communities. Other



Although owned by WhatBus this Sprinter is part of the TINN operation, which means it is fully utilised.

stakeholders in Northumberland are One North East; Northumberland County Council's Community and Environmental Services, Childrens Services and Chief Executive's Services; all the District Councils in Northumberland; the Northumberland Care Trust and the North Tyne NHS Trust.

The strategy recognised that CT sometimes competes and sometimes partners commercial operators, and it saw no problems with that, but it stressed that it is important that the consistent aim for all operators must be better overall transport provision. That provision must be built on a platform of transparency, trust and achieving best value: in other words, a level playing field.

The strategy also covers some of the public procurement issues for public and statutory transport services since CT can potentially be a best value provider.

The starting point for the strategy has to be defining exactly what CT is. Northumberland defined it as passenger transport and related services provided on a non-commercial basis but not excluding work done for local authority social services or education departments on a contracted basis; local bus services operated under Section 22 permits; services operated by organisations where transport is a primary constitutional objective; services operated by a non-statutory organisation and organisations where there is input from volunteers either in management, administration or operation.

From that they developed a common policy framework which would define the policy for CT in the County; identify and confirm the links between statutory functions and CT; establish sustainable funding and support structures for CT; ensure that the outcomes fit into the objectives of more overarching strategic documents covering health, economic development, social cohesion and other aims and establish a framework for evaluating the performance of CT and value for money.

At a practical level, the strategy sought to improve access to services; identify specific gaps in current provision, be they geographical, modal or service level; ensure that operations were

sustainable and had a realistic vehicle replacement policy; ensure there is sustainability in funding streams; set in place an appropriate administrative and support structure with delivery structures that enable support from different partners; facilitate growth of CT capability, particularly where it assists in filling in gaps in transport networks; encourage innovative service delivery and stimulate enhanced output productivity.

The strategy also tackles the, sometimes thorny, subject of relationships between commercial and community operations. It stresses that CT must be integrated with other transport modes. It identifies that CT is sometimes in competition with commercial taxis and buses and sometimes works in partnership with them.

As the strategy says, 'The balance between social accountability, commercial viability, response to customers and maintaining competitiveness is different for every organisation. Strong social and business organisations are needed in Northumberland to respond to a wide variety of transport needs. There is no rigid line that defines whether social or commercial organisations will be best able to compete for public contracts, so public agencies will seek to frame contracts to facilitate open and fair competition.'

It goes on to identify that public authorities support CT and commercial providers in different ways, typically helping with training and transport information. It also identifies that authorities are large purchasers of services and trips. It also recognises that regulation for CT sometimes differs from that of commercial operators but demands that, for all operations, existing construction and use and safety requirements need to be effectively enforced to ensure the safety of passengers and staff. It stresses that transparency and accountability are key principles of good governance and that CT organisations competing fairly for commercial contracts need to be able to demonstrate that there are no hidden subsidies that could lead to unfair practices.

On the question of accountability, it says that CT sometimes suffers because nobody is responsible for ensuring that there is appropriate funding, especially for vehicle replacement. There is often a similar lack of priority given to delivery reflecting local needs. The Strategy seeks to improve the

way CTs are managed and run, so that they manage delivery properly and have clear accountability for the partnership between public agencies and the community.

On the question of priorities it says that successful partnership working needs to recognise that each partner has different priorities and the role of the strategy is to assist the partners in identifying the terms of engagement for negotiating priorities and developing project partnerships. This can be achieved by clarifying how funding relates to policy goals; identifying mechanisms for productive negotiation and sharing information on prioritisation with each separate funding programme; sharing opportunities for multiple partners to make joint funding bids; identifying clear evidence of need and links to funding and setting up and supporting suitable organisations to manage delivery.

The Strategy goes on to consider how it can be delivered looking at specific areas:

1) Identifying the need and how to prioritise delivery to meet that need. This looks at all aspects of need including access to health care; work; education and learning; tackling rural isolation; childcare; shopping and leisure; access to services for young and old people. It summarises the needs by saying 'The level of CT provision in Northumberland needs to be acceptable to the local population. There are many factors affecting local acceptability but, as the CT sector grows across the UK, residents in Northumberland will increasingly desire provision that benchmark's successfully with the best provision elsewhere.' Some rural shire counties (with whom Northumberland can be legitimately compared) spend significant amounts on dial-a-ride and CT, including Hampshire, Devon, Derbyshire, Lancashire, Cheshire and North Yorkshire to name but a few; but at present Northumberland County Council has no revenue budget for this kind of transport at all.

2) Policy framework. The strategy sets out the details of this framework but the key element is



One of these UV Modular Treka minibuses will join the ADAPT fleet this year.

that CT is central to delivery of the policy. It recognises that there are formidable challenges to ensure that all staff across multiple agencies and sectors provide an informed customer interface for members of the public on CT issues; that funding and procurement processes are developed to allow CT to play a fuller role and that planning takes account of the role that CT can play as part of an integrated transport network. Handled properly, it says, CT can play a major part in policy delivery across many sectors including regenera-

Buses for All - innovation

tion; employment and social inclusion; health and social care; education childcare and youth work; the community, the environment and safety and in transport.

At the end of the strategy document it set out an action plan based on those last five themes and the conference was set up for all the involved organisations to sign up to the strategy and to agree the action plan.

On the Transport Action Plan the key actions were:

1) Increase the capacity of CT operations by procuring more services and vehicles from the CT sector; ensuring that capacity to provide affordable group travel is increased in every part of the county; that there is training and support for Development Trusts to strengthen community capacity to deliver and set up a grant scheme for the purchase of minibuses.

2) Marketing of the CT sector to increase recognition of its professional capabilities to achieve the strategic objectives.

3) Improve the integration between service providers, ensuring that commercial, statutory and CT can all deliver to their strengths.

4) Development of site-specific travel plans including parking policies and the role of CT.

5) Improve quality standards with the CT sector, this being achieved by implementing a minibus policy on all procurement by participating operators and setting up a forum where expertise and good practice can be shared.

6) Improve administration and payment structures within CT.

7) Improve booking of transport and allocation of trips to optimal modes.

8) Develop the role of the CT sector in vehicle garaging and maintenance including apprenticeships and training.

Bold strategy

The strategy is a bold one that recognises the key part that CT can play in improving people's lives, especially in a sparsely populated and highly scattered community. However, the principles laid down in the framework of the strategy should be adaptable for any region. I think Northumberland County Council and its partners have taken a valiant step in recognising the importance of CT and the need for much greater use to be made of it. In a time of ever tightening budgets, their approach of trying to achieve the very best delivery and use of assets is commendable.

CT has for far too long beavered away in the background and not received its due recognition. As far as Northumberland is concerned, that is all about to change, indeed it has already begun to change. The strategy identifies clearly that there are weaknesses in the current set up of CT in its area with good operations and also some that don't come up to the mark. But it goes beyond that by laying down ground rules for bringing up standards across the board and that can only be a good thing.

Northumberland is already well down the road with some aspects of the strategy. It has had

notable success in some areas such as the TINN (Transport in North Northumberland) organisation based in Alnwick, which co-ordinates the activities of eight separate organisations making sure that the vehicles owned by the individuals are fully utilised and maintained to the highest standard.



What CT is all about giving socially isolated and disadvantaged people access to services.

The organisation is also a training provider offering MIDAS, PATs and Disability Awareness training.

At the other end of this huge county is ADAPT (Action by Differently Aabled People in Tyneside). Adapt has also pulled together a number of organisations in order to provide a wide range of CT services in their area based on Hexham. Apart from providing minibuses and running both scheduled service under Section 22 and Dial-a-Ride services, they have also secured funding and set up a regional Community Transport Forum and provided a driver training programme for Job



Providing services for disabled people is a major function of CT.

Centre Plus that has helped to put people into full time employment. ADAPT, like TINN, are training providers including MIDAS, PATs, Disability Awareness and are about to begin offering training for the new Driver CPC.

One of the keys to successful operation of CT is the availability of grant funding for new or replacement vehicles. In late 2007, Northumberland County Council started to be proactive on this, finding £70,000 within its capital budget in its Local Transport Plan, and working with other agencies to draw together a fund to

help organisations purchase new buses.

Applicants must meet some stringent standards, which are: that the vehicle will be fully utilised; that its use adheres to the County's aims, objectives and policy areas for CT; they must agree to have their operations and finances independently monitored; they must be able to provide evidence of support from other community groups and they must be financially viable. If they meet those criteria then the County will fund a new vehicle up to a level currently of £35,000. In the past year they have funded two such vehicles, one for TINN and one for ADAPT, and have already agreed further funding for vehicles in 2008.

A year in politics they say is nothing and it takes time to get a programme like this rolling. Changes since the last Choppington event may appear small but they are very significant. For example, the Getabout Northumberland voluntary car scheme being launched in North Northumberland by TINN and the WVRS; the Castle

Morpeth Taxicard system operating in the rural west of their area and the CAN Travel Wheels to Work scheme running in Castle Morpeth and operated by ADAPT and Working Links all have the potential to develop into county wide services.

This is a really exciting development and the model needs to be looked at by other counties because the funding of new vehicles is one of the major factors limiting the growth of CT. The loss of funding sources like Rural Bus Grant and the Urban and Rural Bus Challenges, together with the pillaging by the Government of a huge chunk of Lottery funding has made buying new buses a major problem for CT operations across the country.

I think Northumberland are to be congratulated on developing this strategy but also in taking all the stakeholders along with them. It will undoubtedly transform CT in the region, enabling more people in more areas to have access to public transport. What is perhaps of greatest importance though is that this will be achieved by adopting the highest possible standards of operational efficiency, operating in a totally transparent and co-ordinated manner with other more conventional transport providers. It will be totally accountable, properly funded and will represent the very best value for money for the taxpayers of Northumberland.

The other clever thing about the strategy is that it has been developed in such a way that no changes should be necessary when the present two-tier local Government system gives way to the Unitary Authority.

It is, in my view, a model that every single county in England and the authorities in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland should pay great attention to.

By Rob Orchard

Footnote: The draft Northumberland Community Transport Strategy and the Choppington Conference presentations can be viewed at www.ratransport.co.uk/northumberland.html