

Serving Scotland: Community Transport During Coronavirus

What is Community Transport?

Community transport provides accessible community-led transport on a not-for-profit basis in response to local transport needs that the market has failed to meet, and often represents the only means of transport for people who are isolated and in vulnerable situations.

Under these circumstances, communities band together to create transport solutions to support a wide range of people to access key services and social settings vital for a good quality of life. For example, it enables older people with limited mobility to leave their house and meet friends, family and care needs; it helps people with disabilities to lead independent lives; and supports children and young people to reach school, college or work, and socialise.

In Scotland, CTA supports over 150 members, including schools, day care centres and faith groups. About a third of members offer transport as their primary activity. By effectively harnessing local resources and forging partnerships with public bodies, civil society organisations and other local groups, community transport helps to alleviate transport poverty and its attendant problems. These include social disadvantage and exclusion, time and financial poverty, and multimorbidity.

Using a range of transport modes, including minibuses, MPVs, cars and mopeds, our members deliver services including dial-a-ride, voluntary car schemes, health transport, wheels to work, group hire, and more. Community transport vehicles are also uniquely inclusive – many vehicles are wheelchair accessible, with rear passenger lifts and convertible spaces, while drivers and passenger assistants are professionally trained to assist passengers with mobility issues.

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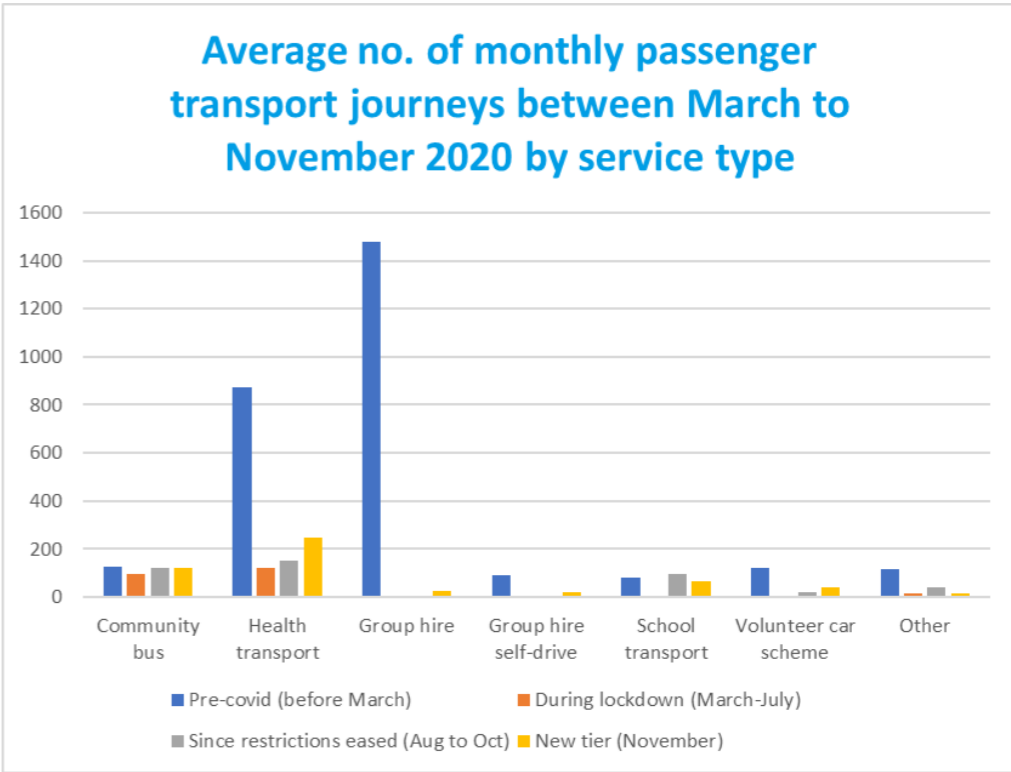
How has the landscape changed for community transport in Scotland during the pandemic?

The coronavirus pandemic has shaken the community transport sector in Scotland – core services have suffered a significant decline, while new services have sprung up to adhere to changed needs, with members delivering essentials and maintaining contact with lonely and isolated passengers.

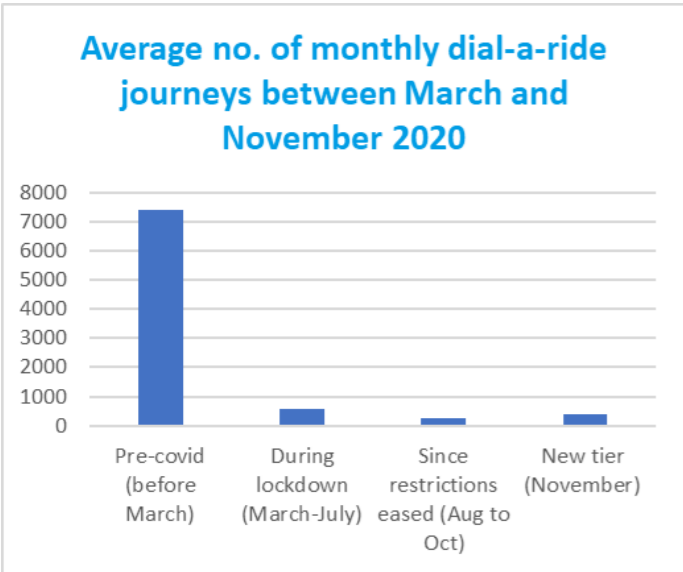
To develop a deeper understanding of how the sector has been affected and to gather insights into what it might need going forward, we surveyed some of CTA's members in Scotland. Our survey has sought to get a sense of how services have changed in response to shifting government guidelines and passenger needs, capturing information across four key periods in the last year – before lockdown, during lockdown, after restrictions eased, and entry into a new tier system.

Effect on core services

Lockdown measures have seriously impacted core passenger transport services operated by community transport organisations in Scotland. Two thirds of services have fallen by over 90% (these include dial-a-ride, group hire, group hire self-drive, school transport and volunteer car schemes), while community bus services have reduced by 26% and health transport by 86%, as demonstrated by the below graphs. It is interesting to observe that community bus services have suffered the least fluctuation across the four periods, demonstrating their importance throughout the pandemic in enabling people to continue accessing key services, particularly in rural areas where commercial provision is often nonexistent in Scotland.



(Changes to dial-a-ride services have been extrapolated from the main graph as this was the service with the highest numbers and visually skewed the rest of the data when placed together.)



While overall journey numbers have somewhat recovered since restrictions were eased in August and have climbed a little further since new local tiers were introduced, the graphs indicate that these figures constitute only a fraction of the original journeys taken before March, suggesting that fear of transmission and its impact on people's desire to travel will have long-term implications.

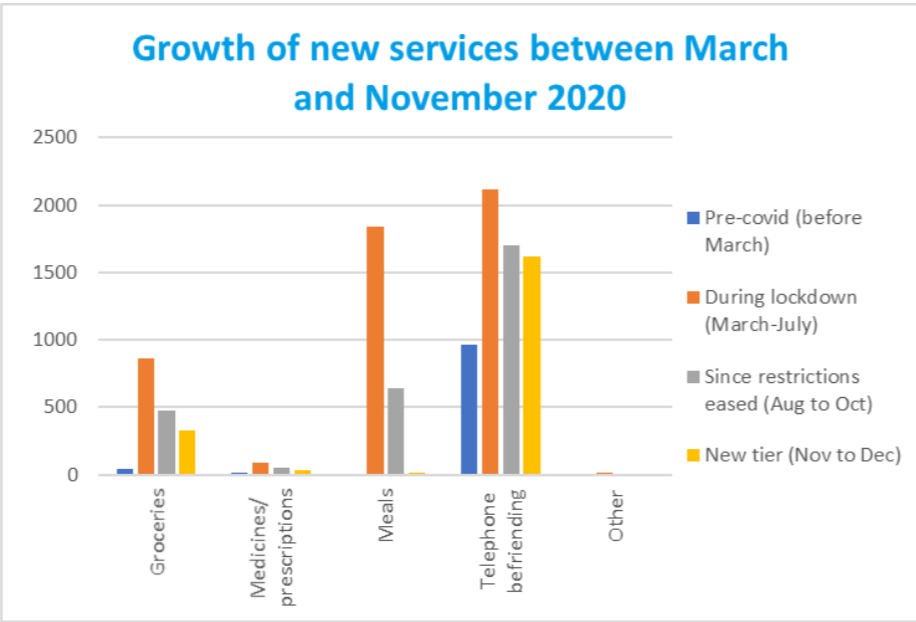
For example, volunteer car scheme journeys total only 42 per month over 13 organisations; before March, 122 volunteer car scheme journeys were operated per month, meaning that the service is currently running at only a third of its usual capacity. Most concerning are

figures for dial-a-ride and group hire services. 399 dial-a-ride journeys are taking place per month now for those organisations surveyed – only 5% of the 7,389 before March; and only 28 of the 1,477 monthly group hire services (where a driver is supplied along with the CT vehicle) are currently running – a mere 2% of pre-covid numbers.

With many organisations relying on the income accrued from group hire work, the blow to this service has generated considerable concern amongst members, who fear the service and the financial stability that usually comes with it, will never recover to pre-pandemic levels. This possibility raises the question of how organisations might sustain themselves going forward, and whether they will be able to at all.

Adapting service

With many passengers needing to shield and no longer able to visit shops and pharmacies themselves, community transport operators have worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic to meet these ongoing needs. The below graph shows how meal, grocery and medicine delivery services shot up once the country entered into lockdown in March and, despite many services now reopening and some dial-a-ride and shopper services picking back up in recent months, the new services have sustained, showing how the CT landscape has shifted this past year.



Meanwhile, telephone befriending services, already a mainstay of CTs' work in supporting users' wellbeing, has grown further to care for those passengers that CTs are no longer able to see in person.

Financial impacts

Organisations have been able to rely on a range of cost-saving measures to stay afloat during the pandemic. Three quarters of the organisations surveyed were able to rely on reserves to uphold staff salaries and cover day-to-day running costs, while just under 40% of respondents benefited from the Job Retention Scheme, which enabled some to continue service with greatly reduced staff numbers. Approximately 60% were also able to rely on other government funding schemes, though these were often small sums to cover cleaning costs, new safety equipment, and meal deliveries.

Yet, in the long term, there are concerns that these cost saving mechanisms will not be sufficient to make up for the significant financial impacts of the pandemic on organisations' incomes. Almost all members have suffered from a significant drop of at least 50% and as much as 100% of fare income, with one CT quoting a total of £124,845. As demonstrated in the graphs above, many have also been hit hard by a reduction in group hire monies, with all organisations that usually receive this type of income quoting a fall of at least 75%.

While it was positive to see that many local authorities had maintained grant funds at pre-coronavirus levels in line with encouragement to do so, it was surprising to note that some organisations had suffered a cut in local authority grant funds and particularly local authority contract funds. These reductions underline the long-term concern surrounding a shortage of local authority funds to support CTs, especially given our understanding that many local authorities have had to re-appropriate usual grant monies as emergency funds for covid-19.

On top of this, as demand increases as services and businesses reopen, ongoing social distancing requirements will continue to place pressures on vehicle capacity, meaning that operators will have to incur increased operational costs (on fuel and salaries) to cater to renewed transport needs. In other words, CTs will need to work doubly hard to meet rejuvenated demand, preventing operators from recovering income lost over lockdown.



As such, while many organisations felt that they were able to sustain their services in the next financial year, many mentioned that this was contingent on reserve monies holding out and BSOG funds staying consistent – a precarious position. Hence, it is vital that multi-year funding is made available to ensure that community transport organisations are able to deliver the social and economic value that has clearly been life-sustaining for so many people during this pandemic.

Innovating service

With users during normal times already suffering with loneliness and isolation and poor access to services, particularly in sparsely populated rural areas of Scotland, the closure of services and the isolation of lockdown has left many feeling stranded. To tackle this, many of our members in Scotland have introduced new services to soften the impact of changes and to care for their users in new ways.

Health transport

The community transport sector in Scotland has a decades-rich history of connecting with health services for the benefit of passengers, staff members and the NHS. During a time of turmoil in recent months, this collaboration has been especially important.

Supporting patients

Enabling passengers to continue accessing medical appointments has been a central component of community transport in Scotland during the pandemic, especially given the complex health needs for many passengers who are older and have disabilities.

Eileen, a 73 year old passenger of Killin and District Volunteer Car Scheme (KDVC), who has been reliant on community transport to access a range of healthcare needs since losing her driving licence after being diagnosed with glaucoma several years ago, provides an example of how community transport has helped those like her through the pandemic:

"Thanks to Killin and District Volunteer Car scheme I have not felt the negative impacts of lockdown that I feared I would. The volunteers who operate this car scheme go above and beyond to make sure I reach critical healthcare appointments. These wonderful people ensure I am physically and socially supported, heard and connected to my community. I honestly don't know what I would have done without them over the past few months."



"Recently my daughter was organizing a fundraiser for a charitable group. Killin and District Car Scheme was the first group I put forward for donation. Whenever I use the service, I ensure to leave a tip, although, I honestly feel that there is no way I can repay them for what they have contributed to my wellbeing. The service they offer is priceless."

"I cannot express my gratitude and appreciation for Killin and District Volunteer Car Scheme. These volunteers continue to adapt and evolve in the face of adversity for the good of their community and its most vulnerable people."

For the NHS

By connecting with the health service, the community transport sector also provides a range of benefits beyond enabling people to access primary healthcare.

In the Grampian region, for example, community transport has been vital in supporting the Health and Transport Action Plan (HTAP), initiated in 2008 between NHS Grampian and Nestrans, which offers a centralised information and transport advice service for people travelling to health and social care appointments in the region. Over time, the service has helped to map how health, social care and transport are provided, and has helped to build a picture of community transport coverage, on a region-wide level.

Under the HTAP, THInC (Transport to Healthcare Information Centre) works as a signposting service for urgent requests for patient transfers and has been essential during the pandemic in transporting NHS staff to work and taking staff home if they become unwell. Similarly, Larkhall and District Volunteer Group has also been transporting key workers to a local NHS Distribution Centre.

Moreover, in recent months, THInC has been an important gateway through which the NHS could easily and efficiently link together the three Local Authority Passenger Transport Units with community transport operators and commercial services; as well as an essential hub from which to gather crucial information on how to appropriately manage transport in a covid-safe way.



Shopping and prescription deliveries

With many CT users comprising of those in high-risk age and health categories, many community transport operators have been delivering shopping directly to passengers' homes so that they are able to stay safe.

Interloch Transport, operating in Argyll, are a wonderful example of this, with their shopping delivery service becoming so popular during the pandemic that they even saw an increase in patronage: 'With most of our members shielding at home, we immediately scaled up our existing shopping and prescription delivery services, putting in place additional hygiene measures and introducing a secure cashless system. Thanks to the efforts of our dedicated staff and volunteers, we have been able to offer this support to an additional 200 people over and above our usual service users.'



Ron (88), a regular user of Interloch's assisted shopping trips before the pandemic, describes how Interloch quickly stepped up their service in March – 'Ken and Cat have been protecting us. They rang to say "no more trips to the supermarket for you I'm afraid." Instead, they have been collecting and delivering our shopping every Monday.'

Ron and his partner Rena (83) credit Interloch for allowing them to retain their independence, with Rena asserting that 'Without Interloch, we would be in a care home right now. I've no doubt about that at all.'

The care experienced by Ron is not unique. Hetty, a user of Badenoch and Strathspey CT's shopping delivery service, praised driver Derek's attentive fruit shopping, 'Your driver gets it so right each week with my shopping, I've never had an unripe melon yet, I want to clone him!'

Similarly, Lorraine, Manager of Orkney Disability Forum, told us how 'enormously grateful' one of their users was in meeting her specific dietary requirements during her weekly shop, which was carried out for five months during and beyond lockdown. Meanwhile, other community transport organisations have partnered with foodbanks to help those most in need during this challenging time. Lothian Community Transport services driver, Davy, pictured below, helps out at the Cyrenians foodbank in Edinburgh.

The value of these shopping deliveries cannot be underestimated. Before the pandemic, trips out with local community transport operators had enabled those without loved ones nearby to make friends and build relationships; with these social activities stopping under lockdown, shopping deliveries have become the only social contact left for many of these users. As described by Dundee CT, 'During lockdown, I had one driver who got messages for a lady every fortnight as she had no family. Before lockdown we had been taking her out every Friday for the past few years but due to Covid we couldn't do that. Therefore, our driver collected her list and got food shopping for her as well as any clothes that she was needing. Unfortunately, that lady has now passed away.'



Growing confidence and maintaining independence

With lockdown restrictions easing at the beginning of autumn, many CTs resumed some of their usual service with new safety and cleaning measures, to allow passengers to leave their home and rejuvenate their physical and mental health.

Maggie at Badenoch and Strathspey CT shared a particularly special story about how one of their older users has found their resumed trips to the supermarket to be a huge boost to his confidence. This user suffers with deafness – a disability which has sometimes made it difficult for him to develop social connections – and turned to Maggie and her team when the person he usually relies on for lifts needed to isolate. Though shy at first approach, he now travels with them twice a week for shopping trips and expressed his joy at their service in a text – 'You will be my best friends 'til my heart stops beating.'

Orkney Disability Forum also describes their service during lockdown – 'we were able to deliver with our wheelchair accessible minibuses mobility scooters or wheelchairs, (which we hire out) to people to enable them to be able to go out, get some fresh air and exercise during lockdown. This was invaluable to some people who would otherwise have been totally isolated and completely cut off during the initial lockdown.'

Meanwhile, May (79) told us about how Larkhall and District Volunteer Group has helped her and her son Thomas (52) to maintain their sense of wellbeing in recent months:

"Before Covid-19 I led a very active life. I am a mother of six and a grandmother of seven, so as you can imagine I am used to having family around at all times. However, since Government restrictions have been put in place I have felt a sudden loss of routine, which has proven difficult and at times has created an anxious environment. I live with my son Thomas, who is blind. Thomas is a very gentle and fun loving person, who thrives in a social setting. For us, maintaining a sense of independence throughout lockdown has not been easy.

"At the beginning of lockdown access to food and essentials was a pronounced worry. Thanks to Larkhall and District Volunteer Group this worry has been rectified. Every Thursday the community bus collects us and brings us grocery shopping to our local centre. This service has played an essential role in keeping us connected to our community and enabled us to maintain a quality of life in what has been such an uncertain and scary time. Generally Thomas is quiet in the house, but as soon as we are on the bus he is full of chat and laughter. We generally make the journey with one of our neighbors, which qualifies as our social support bubble. I know this weekly trip means as much to our neighbour as it does to us.

"Since the passing of my beloved husband last year, this community bus has provided a social outlet that gives Thomas and I something to look forward to. It has instilled a sense of independence in us, which felt like it was acutely lost to Covid-19.

"Government restrictions may change, but the need to feel seen and heard does not change. Larkhall and District Volunteer Group makes my son and I feel seen, and that is an invaluable and essential support to our family."



"You will be my best friends at @Where2Today 'til my heart stops beating."

From a passenger of Badenoch and Strathspey Community Transport

"Ken and Cat have been protecting us...Without Interloch, we would be in a care home right now. I've no doubt about that at all."

Ron and Rena, users of Interloch Transport

"Government restrictions may change, but the need to feel seen and heard does not change. Larkhall and District Volunteer Group makes my son and I feel seen, and that is an invaluable and essential support to our family."

May, passenger of Larkhall and District Volunteer Group

"These volunteers continue to evolve and adapt in the face of adversity for the good of their community and its most vulnerable people."

Eileen, user of Killin and District Volunteer Car Scheme



Hi £20 YR Fee +
£20 Donation To you as 'its
the best bus service & staff
+ drivers in Orkney!
Brenda Naylor Many
Doverhaide Thanks



CTA and community transport

Since March, CTA have been working hard to stay abreast and ahead of changes related to the pandemic. Below, we chart some of the work we have been doing to support the sector.

March

- 1st March - first case of coronavirus in Scotland
- 19th March - Job Retention Scheme (furlough) begins
 - **CTA contacts members to communicate changes around covid**
- 23rd March - National lockdown begins
- 26th March - CTA produces lockdown guidance**

April

- 1st April - CTA begins weekly calls with Transport Scotland**
- 3rd April - CTA holds first UK-wide Advice Drop-In on Zoom**
- 5th April - CTA begins publishing Serving the Community case studies to highlight members' hard work**
- 9th April - CTA updates members on Government support for charities and other funding sources and on new guidance on social distancing**
- 13th April - Scottish Government release £50m for wellbeing fund for Third Sector
- 23rd April - Scottish Government release *Coronavirus (COVID-19): framework for decision making*

May

- 7th May - Transport Scotland pauses roll-out of LEZs
- 13th May - CTA releases *Report: Community Transport During Coronavirus***

June

- 1st June - CTA celebrates Volunteers' Week**
- 3rd June - CTA speaks to the Just Transition commissioners about how to protect CT and its users alongside the mission to achieve a carbon neutral Scotland**
- 15th June - CTA publishes a joint statement on Covid-19 recovery together with other transport groups**
- 26th June - Scottish Government creates Covid Support Recovery Grant to support recipients of BSOG

July

- 1st July - CTA releases Covid-specific risk assessment toolkit**
- 7th July - CTA presents on members' contribution to the pandemic to the Scottish Government's National Advisory Group on Covid-19**
- 17th July - CTA holds Recovery and Restart webinar for members**
- 29th July - CTA releases car scheme guidance**

August

- 1 Aug - Chancellor announces Eat Out to Help Out scheme
- 9 Aug - Children return to school, many of them on CT vehicles
- 18 Aug - Scottish Government release £7m for PPE costs across public, school and community transport
- 25 Aug - Scottish Government asks school children to wear face coverings on school transport

September

- 11th Sept - CTA presents to ATCO about the sector's contribution over the pandemic**
- 16th Sept - CTA speaks at Rachael Hamilton MSP's event on Older People to share the sector's positive work**

October

- 1st Oct - CTA begins delivering Good to Go webinars**
- 7th Oct - CTA facilitates sessions at Scottish Rural and Island Community event**
- 15th Oct - CTA begins delivering Big Question, Big Ideas webinars**
- 26 Oct - CTA submit response to Scottish Govt's consultation on Concessionary Travel and CT**

November

- 2nd Nov - Scottish Govt introduces local authority level restrictions across Scotland
- 6th Nov - CTA updates guidance to reflect the Scottish Government's tier system**
- 18th Nov - Tom Davy, Joint Head of Bus and Concessionary Travel Policy at Transport Scotland, speaks with members at CTA's Meet the Minister event**
- 16th Nov - CTA refreshes Advice Resources for members**
- 26th Nov - CTA speak at National Transport Scotland event**

December

- 9th Dec - Members meet with Energy Savings Trust about the fund for in-vehicle protective equipment

Tom Davy, Joint Head of Bus and Concessionary Travel Policy at Transport Scotland, chats to CTA members and staff at our Meet the Minister webinar event in November.



What does the future hold for the community transport sector in Scotland?



As 2020 draws to a close and we reflect on the many challenges and achievements that our members have faced, the future of the sector feels uncertain.

Many of our members have shared with us how their reserve monies have been undercut to launch new services to meet changed needs, others saving for new low carbon vehicles have told us how they will now need to reprioritise their funds, while the prospect of ever-shrinking local authority budgets looms large for all.

It is undoubted that, while the community transport sector in Scotland has always been essential in the fabric of the transport network and in communities across the country, it has shone particularly brightly during the pandemic. New delivery services, changed shopping trips, and continued health journeys, amongst many other adaptations, have not only benefited their passenger base directly, but has helped health and social care workers to reach the frontline, and connected the NHS with resources at a most crucial time.

While the recent Pfizer vaccine raises hopes for normality, community transport organisations are committed to continuing to operate under covid-safe conditions to eliminate any risks to their high-risk passenger base, meaning that there is likely to be ongoing social distancing aboard vehicles, along with the increased operational costs attached to that. The instances of reduced local authority grant and contract funds, alongside this, also demonstrates the financial difficulties presented to transport authorities that will undoubtedly worsen in the coming months.

The recovery of Scotland's national wellbeing is contingent on supporting local communities, economies and people – a mission which community transport is central to. As such, Transport Scotland will need to grow their support of community transport in the coming years. Local authorities and community transport operators will need to see, not only funding maintained at pre-covid levels, but a growth in funds to match the increased operational costs of delivering services that have always been indispensable before covid, but have become even more so as the pandemic hits at already dwindling commercial transport provision and erodes the confidence of those in vulnerable situations to leave their home.



A message from CTA's Director for Scotland, Rachael Murphy:

"This has been a tumultuous year for everyone, but I've been bowled over by members' hard work, adaptability and energy. Whatever 2021 brings, I feel confident that our sector will meet it head on, and I'm particularly hopeful we can play a key role in the roll-out of the vaccine."

"I want to finish by thanking my colleague in Scotland, Emer, for her hard work for members this year and the CTA team more widely for their support."



"We would also like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to friend of the sector, and former CTA employee, Sheila Fletcher (pictured right). Sheila, who passed away in May 2020, was a vocal advocate of community transport and we cherish her legacy."

More information

For more examples of the work being done by community transport and regular updates on changes to guidance, be sure to follow CTA on twitter and keep up to date with our blog.

Details of both, and how to get in touch with us if you want more information, are below.



ctauk.org



[@CTAUK1](https://twitter.com/CTAUK1)

hello@ctauk.org

If you need support

If you're a community transport provider who needs support, or if you have any questions about what the Government's guidance means for your organisation, you can find our latest guidance at ctauk.org/covid19-guidance/ or email our advice team via advice@ctauk.org.