

Case Study

Gower Voluntary Transport

Gower Voluntary Transport (GVT) was started in a front room more than 30 years ago by two volunteers, worried about the isolation of older people in their local village of Penclawdd, Swansea. A community car scheme, GVT was established in 1987 to provide transport for disabled people, older people and socially excluded people for whom public transport is either not available or accessible. Since its inception, the volunteer-led service has grown substantially and now delivers around 7000 journeys a year.

In an increasingly digital age, Volunteer Co-ordinator Hildegard Roberts and her small volunteer office team take an old-school approach to meeting the needs of their service users. With around 30 volunteer drivers all with varying availability through the week, the team can match a client with a driver from memory (and the help of an A4 diary!) with just 24 hours' notice and offer journeys six days a week. The organisation has no paid employees and the team donate more than 5000 volunteer hours a year. Sadly, they still have to decline around 2% of requests for journeys due to a lack of resources and are constantly seeking volunteer drivers to help them meet demand. Most of their volunteers are referred by friends already volunteering for GVT, with some joining the scheme after seeing posters in their local community.

Tackling Loneliness and Isolation

While Penclawdd is one of the Gower's most picturesque villages, it is fairly remote and not well served by public transport. "Our service users really couldn't manage without us," said Hildegard, "there really is no alternative here. The public buses are so limited with large distances between the bus stops and people living up narrow lanes with their homes a long way from the bus route. The majority of the older people living in the village don't have cars; GVT was started to support those older and disabled people who otherwise would be stuck at home."

GVT's service has grown beyond Penclawdd and now has volunteers across much of the West of Swansea who use their own cars to support people who have no other form of transport available to them. These journeys cost the passenger 60p per mile with a minimum charge of £3, and passengers are supported to undertake a wide range of journeys including medical appointments, accessing day centres and social clubs, doing the weekly shop or simply meeting friends. There is no restriction on the passengers' destinations, creating a democratic and accessible service for those whose health,

mobility or income would otherwise see them trapped in their own homes. Many of GVT's clients use the service for all their journeys, staying connected and active in their own communities.

Transport to Health

Around 45% of GVT's journeys connect passengers with health appointments, primarily the hospital and local GP surgeries with some people also accessing dentists, opticians and physiotherapy appointments. While the local hospital used to make up a more substantial percentage of their health journeys, the recent closure of a small, local GP surgery has seen GVT's clients travelling further to access their nearest doctor. This has impacted on journey times and distances, particularly as their ageing client base has increasingly complex needs.

Mrs A lives in West Cross and in recent months has been using GVT for health appointments at least three times a week. While she would qualify for Non-Emergency Patient Transport (NEPTs), this would mean each visit to the hospital's wound clinic, just 15 minutes from her home, would take most of the day due to the limited availability of the NEPTs service. Her ill-health means she can't use public transport, so GVT's support has meant she's been able to access all her appointments rather than being forced to choose between missing an appointment or becoming exhausted waiting for the NEPT ambulance. As her health improves and appointments at the wound clinic become less frequent, GVT have begun transporting her to physiotherapy swimming sessions which are helping her to rebuild her strength and flexibility. GVT's support is essential to Mrs A, safeguarding her health and wellbeing and ensuring her ongoing independence.

GVT receive around £10,000 each year from Swansea Council to support them to deliver their services by covering back office costs and volunteer expenses. This funding, supported by the passenger contributions, is instrumental in ensuring GVT's passengers are able to complete these essential journeys which they have no other way of making. The threat of funding cuts each year, however, is putting some 3000 journeys connecting patients, and everything that comes with them, at risk. With a limited public bus service and prohibitively expensive taxi journeys, any reduction in GVT's service will mean that many of these older and vulnerable clients will be unable to make their appointments. So far they've been fortunate and funding has not been reduced, but it's touch and go and Hildegard is already exploring alternative funding sources to ensure these essential journeys can continue.

Mrs B lives in Mayals and uses GVT for all her transport. At 96 she has never driven, and her niece and nephew who used to take her out in their car have recently had to start using the bus themselves. Due to her declining health, Mrs B often has appointments at the GP, hospital and the local opticians, and also uses GVT to visit friends and do her shopping. She has developed a strong friendship with one of the volunteer drivers who started volunteering to tackle his own loneliness and isolation, and they both get a great deal out of their regular journeys. Without GVT, Mrs B would be unable to afford anything but essential journeys as taxis in the area are so expensive and she can't access a public bus. GVT allows her to stay healthy, well and connected with her community.