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**Permanent Secretary Dr Julie Harrison
Clarence Court
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7th March 2023

RE: RCTPs Dial-A-Lift Funding

Thank you for your letter dated 2nd March in which you explained that the financial position for 2023/24 is likely to be very challenging, require extremely difficult decisions, and confirmed payments to RCTPs will be extended by one month into April 2023 for the Dial-a-Lift service. I am sure you will understand that it is disappointing and extremely concerning to receive this news. You may think that this relieves some pressure on the RCTPs but it does not. I write again to urge you not to make a decision to discontinue the funding currently provided to Community Transport providers.

In light of your response, I will provide further context on the current situation of the RCTPs, seek some clarification around the decision-making process, and to outline the action we are taking as a collective, led by the CTA.

The RCTPMs have extended a significant amount of goodwill towards the Department for Infrastructure over the years. They have been flexible and accommodating in the face of late payments and delayed confirmation of funds to be paid. For example, in 2022/23 the Dial-a-Lift service ran for over a month without any written confirmation that funding would be received. However, last year there was an understanding that money would be received, and the clear message presently is that a decision will be taken to discontinue this funding.

It is vital to note that this is a sector where passenger levels have grown to beyond pre-Covid levels. The current demand for the service is outstripping what can be supplied even within current levels of funding. This is contrary to passenger behaviour in other areas of the sector, indicating the importance of this service, the lifeline it provides for its members, and the trust these members have in the providers of the Dial-a-Lift service.

The guarantee of one month's additional funding has perhaps been granted on the assumption that it will enable these organisations to operate on a 'business as usual' basis. This is far from the case. Given the RCTPMs have received the clear message that no funding can be guaranteed beyond April 2023, many of these organisations will be forced to use any reserve funding they have to prepare to wind up the service, and their organisations in many cases. It is extremely likely that without any guarantee of funding by the end of March 2023, that it will not be viable for the RCTPMs to run Dial-a-Lift services past this date. As I mentioned previously, this presents a very real threat to lives, livelihoods and social connections in rural communities across Northern Ireland. Furthermore, should this be the case, the Dial-a-Lift service will not just 'cease', it will be 'terminated'. Once it is terminated, the situation is fatal because 250,000 trips per annum to basic and essential services stop. The infrastructure, resources and capability will be lost; it cannot be turned off and on. Once notice is given to staff, the 'lifeline' service which has existed for the past number of years and for which demand is increasing at unprecedented rates given the ageing nature of the rural population and increasing prevalence of mobility issues within this cohort will be irreparably damaged. This is being further compounded by the continued erosion of Translink rural services and the threat of further cuts to rural services of up to 10% if Translink experiences any diminution in its budget for 2023-2024, as well as the present 7.5% fare increase.

On behalf of the RCTPMs:

- I request that the RCTPMs are paid their retention money as a matter of urgency. The RCTPMs have been forced into crisis and I urge the Department to forego the policy of retaining March's payment and that these monies are credited to the partner's accounts within the next two weeks.
- I confirm that the RCTPMs will be submitting their applications for funding for 2023/24 in the usual way and will meet the deadline.
- Once the deadline has expired, I request that a decision on 2023/24 funding is made and communicated to the RCTPMs by 31st March 2023. This will enable them to make decisions, depending on the outcome of their applications, to continue to operate without a disruption in service provision or wind up their organisations as outlined above if the funding granted is insufficient or removed entirely.
- I suggest that full cost recovery is observed when making the decision to award 2023/24 grants, and that inflation is also considered. The funding pot has remained at circa £2.2m since 2015 and with the application of inflation, the funding pot ought to be circa £2.78m.

Beyond the end of March there will still be discussions to be had to enable us to move forward positively. Namely, how this funding can be ringfenced and awarded on a multi-year basis to remove this terrible uncertainty for organisations and their vulnerable members.

Having outlined my requests on behalf of the RCTPs I would now like to raise a number of wider issues on which I would appreciate some clarity. It was clear from our meeting with Stuart Gilmore on 21st February that no substantive work or equality assessment has been carried out to assess the impact of a removal or reduction in funding to the Dial-a-Lift service on the lives of disabled and older people in rural Northern Ireland. It is indisputable that a decision to remove such funding would disproportionately impact disabled and elderly people, and indeed fall foul of your requirement to protect and uphold equality and prevent discrimination. Whilst I appreciate the challenging financial situation facing the public sector, I would like to understand the following:

- Do you intend to do any work on the impact of cuts to this service before you make any budgetary decision to reduce funding or cease funding the Dial-a-Lift service? Is there any opportunity for the CTA and the RCTPs to contribute to that work?
- The Department maintains that it appreciates the contribution Community Transport makes and so I assume that recent communications/decisions are purely the result of stretched public finances. Has any cost-benefit analysis been carried out?

The table below briefly highlights the important and devastating financial impact of withdrawing or reducing funding for the Dial-a-Lift service:

Current Dial-a-Lift provision	Costs should Dial-a-Lift funding be withdrawn or reduced
Bellaghy to Draperstown under DAL is £5 each way	A local taxi firm costs £35 each way
The 52-mile return journey (26 miles each way) by a member of Fermanagh Community Transport with no Concessionary Pass costs £17	A young single mother from southeast Fermanagh received a hospital appointment for her six-year-old son at the Southwest Acute Hospital in Enniskillen. This lady held no concessionary pass. There is no Translink service which this mother could avail of. She had called a taxi service and received a quote of £65. The mother was in tears and she said she was going to have to cancel her son's hospital appointment. She was encouraged to sign herself and her son up as members, and she was able to make the journey for £17.
A 27-year-old female wheelchair user from Annalong travelling to Daisy Hill Hospital, Newry is 50-mile return cost of £50.	The cost for a private taxi for the same trip if they have a wheelchair accessible vehicle available is £100. At present there is only one wheelchair accessible vehicle available in Newry and they charge double the normal fare.

It would be an extremely short-sighted decision to make budget cuts to this service. Who will bear these additional costs if the Dial-a-Lift service is terminated?

Any decision must also consider the practicalities of how difficult it is to book a taxi during peak travel times as most taxi firms are engaged in 'home to school' work for the Education Authority. This leaves limited hours available for transport to health appointments for vulnerable people. Furthermore, the wait times can be over 2 hours in some areas. As stated in my initial letter, Community Transport is a solution, not a burden – solving more problems than the funding complications the Department seems to think it creates.

- Has the cross-departmental working group and the other department Permanent Secretaries been notified of the potential removal of funding for the RCTPs, particularly the potential impact on health as illustrated above? I suggest that there is an opportunity here for departments to work together to deliver their departmental goals and priorities and come together to ensure that the community transport scheme is fully funded to meet the needs of older and disabled people.
- Have you any comment on the feeling within the sector that these recent communications from the Department directly contravene the Concordat and the agreement between the Community Sector and the Government Departments to work together?

Finally, in the interests of transparency I will outline the CTA's next steps with, and on behalf of, the RCTPs.

1. I will make this letter and its contents 'open' so that I can share it with relevant stakeholders for their expertise and support within and beyond the sector. I will also share it with other organisations potentially impacted by the lack of certainty around 2023/24 funding.
2. In my initial letter I suggested that due to the high proportion of disabled and older people the RCTPs serve, this potential withdrawal or reduction of ongoing funding for rural Dial-a-Lift effectively discriminates against disabled and older people in rural areas of Northern Ireland, contravening the DDA, The Rural Needs Act, and s75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and I would argue, is unlawful. Whilst I understand that the Department is under pressure to make cuts, there remains a legal duty to ensure any cuts do not disproportionately impact disabled people. Disabled and elderly people are a category of persons to whom are protected under the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) and as such, any decision to remove the funding in these terms would contravene Article 14 of the ECHR. I am seeking legal counsel on this situation.
3. In addition, it is clear that currently this decision is being taken by you as the Permanent Secretary of the Department for Infrastructure. This however is a cross cutting and controversial issue which ought to be placed before the

Northern Ireland Executive. As you are aware, DAERA are a responsible stakeholder given the funding they provide for the smart passes. As such, any decision to remove the funding for this service cuts across two adjoining departments, and ought to be referred to the Northern Ireland Executive in the usual manner.

4. The RCTPs have notified their staff of the current situation and will write to all their members week commencing 6th March to notify them that there is a potential risk that their services may be reduced or withdrawn from April 2023 based on information provided by DFI.
5. Given the magnitude of the situation, the CTA believe that it is in the public interest to make people, communities, organisations, and political representatives aware of the dire situation the RCTPs and their members are facing. We will therefore be engaging in media coverage to raise awareness of the situation.

I continue to welcome an opportunity to discuss these matters with you and/or Stuart Wightman, Director of Public Transport Operations, at any time you are available, and our diaries allow. I would also welcome a response to the points and requests raised in this letter by 14th March. I remain hopeful that we can reach a resolution and a beneficial way forward for the partners, all potentially impacted individuals, and rural communities in Northern Ireland.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Victoria Armstrong', written over a light blue horizontal line.

Dr Victoria Armstrong, Chief Executive Officer, CTA