

Article by Fiona Liddell as appeared in Network Wales on 16 May 2005

## Volunteering for all? Volunteering and older people

In a series of articles Fiona Liddell looks at experiences of volunteering by people from different sectors of society.

The 'Cars for Carers' volunteer transport scheme began in Pembrokeshire two and a half years ago. It was the answer to two different and complementary problems.

Firstly, a large number of unpaid carers, comprising some 10 – 12% of the Pembrokeshire population, are in need of transport for essential day to day journeys – including to medical services, and social and leisure activities. Many carers do not own a car. Of those who do, some have lost confidence through years of being in the passenger seat with their spouse at the wheel. Others find that unlit, rural roads and parking problems make driving a nerve-racking experience, especially if they are responsible for a passenger with mobility difficulties and therefore need to park close to their destination.

The second problem was that a number of older volunteers who enjoy driving with local community transport schemes were being asked to retire on their 70th or 75th birthday on the grounds that they were not covered by the scheme's insurance policy. One such volunteer approached RSVP (the Retired and Senior Volunteer Programme), little knowing that he was to be the impetus for a brand new project!

Now there are twenty eight volunteers 'on the books'. Volunteers manage the day to day enquiries and arrange the rota of drivers. A project worker is employed to register new carers, promote the scheme to carers groups and potential new drivers, to foster links with other transport services and to give overall direction and supervision. Cars for Carers is now heavily used to provide transport as required for Pembrokeshire's young carers and their chaperones.

Len spent much of his lifetime in the merchant navy. On land he felt like 'a fish out of water'. Volunteer driving has given him 'an anchor' and helped him find his feet and get to know people. Len remembers the day when he gave a lift to an autistic boy and his mother. In the car he talked with them and played relaxing music to entertain them. Arriving home, the child got as far as the front door then spontaneously ran back to give Len a big hug.

Cars for Carers pays generous mileage expenses (the maximum allowable by the Inland Revenue) so Len can afford to volunteer with other, less well remunerated transport schemes as well.

Gordon is a dignified, quiet man who has twice had to face the ordeal of bereavement. After his second wife died he was bereft. For him volunteer driving has been 'a lifeline'.

For Len, Gordon and many others, volunteering offers a way out of the isolation experienced by so many older people.

'But what about the insurance?' I hear you asking. 'How can the scheme take on people over 75 when other organisations say they cannot?' 'Not a problem' says project worker Rachel Evans. 'RSVP arranges personal liability cover up to the age of 85 years'. 'But aren't older volunteer drivers a bit of a liability?' you may wonder. Rachel believes the risks are no greater than for other transport schemes. 'Once I was beginning to get concerned about a certain volunteer's fitness to drive,' she said 'but before I had to say or do anything, he himself asked to switch to non-driving duties instead'. In a small scheme where people know one another and communication is good, drivers can be weaned off the job sensitively when the time is right.

Although forthcoming legislation about age discrimination does not apply to volunteers, imposing a retirement age for volunteers on the basis of arbitrary age is an unjustifiable barrier to volunteering. As it is, a survey of volunteering in Wales\* suggests that volunteer involvement is lowest amongst the over 75 age group.

Inevitably disability and frailty will limit opportunities for some older volunteers, but tasks should be assigned according to an objective assessment of their capabilities and not simply on the basis of age.

Age Alliance Wales is developing a network of support for senior volunteers in Wales. It regards the inclusion of older people in 'meaningful activity' as a core ingredient of the Welsh Assembly Strategy for Older people.\*\*

\* Volunteering in Wales 2001. National Assembly for Wales

\*\*Visit [Agealliancewales.org.uk](http://Agealliancewales.org.uk) for more information

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