

MOTORING AHEAD

WRVS COMMUNITY TRANSPORT SCHEMES ARE MORE THAN JUST A WAY TO GET FROM A TO B – THEY'RE A LIFELINE TO LIFE ITSELF. JANE YETTRAM REPORTS

From its rugged hills to its green fields, Herefordshire is a breathtaking rural county. But such natural beauty conceals a daunting problem for many older and disabled people – isolation.

With bus services few and far between, or unusable for those with mobility problems, many people are left stranded in their own homes. Nationally, as many as a third of over-70s have difficulty getting out and about, rising to 50 per cent for the over-80s.

This is the reason WRVS community transport services – such as that run by Debbie Griffiths in Herefordshire's Ross-on-Wye – are vital. Debbie, who works 30 paid hours a week for WRVS but many more volunteer hours on top, is passionate about her job. "It is a privilege to be part of a team that gives support and pleasure to others. I feel such pride to be working with volunteers who do all this for no financial reward. That and the smiles on people's faces are so uplifting – it's as if I start the day being 5ft, but end up over 6ft tall!"

Recruiting more drivers

Currently, 45 WRVS transport services across the country serve 100 communities, which last year added up to 60,000 lifts, enabling 7,000 people to take part in 112,000 activities that others take for granted. And WRVS is committed to maintaining and growing these transport services that mean so much to so many.

Debbie is always looking for more volunteers, either using their own car or

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another vehicle. "We have a social car scheme, with volunteers driving their own cars, as well as several MPVs with ramps and hydraulics for wheelchairs. Then there's the minibus, funded by Lottery money – we could really do with another minibus too!"

Debbie's volunteers get training to drive the minibus, which is a godsend to many who use the service, including the residents of Hazelhurst Nursing Home. "We use the minibus to take them to the pub, out for meals, to see the daffodils and bluebells in spring..." says Debbie.

Improving quality of life

But although many people who use the service are older, Debbie stresses that it is there for anyone in need. "Recently, we lent the minibus to an outward-bound centre to enable a young man with severely disabling Duchenne's disease to take part in a course."

Such quality of life matters as much as practical things. "It's not just hospital,

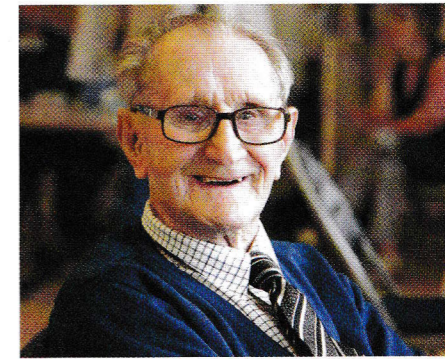
doctor and dentist appointments that we help with," says Debbie. "It's wherever anyone needs to go – shopping, family events, concerts, training courses... Even on Christmas Day the WRVS lunch club is running and the volunteer drivers are out bringing people together to celebrate."

The service is subsidised by Herefordshire Council and costs are worked out with them. Although Debbie would love the service to be free, it's still affordable. "For example, a trip from Ross to Hereford – about 15 miles – would be about £4.50," says Debbie. "Much less than a taxi."

Marjorie Llewellyn, 85, and her husband George, 93, agree. Volunteers drive them to hospital, clinics and the WRVS lunch club. "The service saves us a great deal of money," says Marjorie. "If we couldn't call on WRVS we'd have to take taxis."

Another frequent user of the service is Grace McKeown, 87, and her husband Peter, 86. Two years ago, Grace suffered a severe stroke. Physically disabled but completely astute, she had to move into a residential home, leaving Peter alone.

For a couple still very much in love, it was heartbreaking. So, twice a week a volunteer takes Peter to visit Grace. And every Friday Grace is taken to the WRVS lunch club, where she meets Peter. It's precious time together and to see the devotion in their eyes as they greet each other is very moving. As Jeff Kendell – a paid WRVS worker who also puts in many volunteer hours – says, "I never knew



Whether it's taking people to the shops or to attend appointments, community transport is vital

what love and compassion was until I saw Peter and Grace."

When asked how she feels about her weekly lunch dates with Peter, Grace simply says, "Wonderful!" To be away from the home, sitting with Peter and enjoying a cooked meal means the world to her.

Another WRVS lunch club regular is Eve Holland, 89, and WRVS transport is the only way she can get there. "I couldn't possibly walk," she says, "and buses are out of the question. The drivers are friendly and the ladies with them are so kind and caring. I don't know where I'd be without them."

People are always appreciative of the drivers. Louise Cook lives several miles outside Ross and it is the WRVS service that enables her to do her weekly shop. "This week was the first time I took Mrs Cook shopping, and I'm pleased to be able to help," says Jeff. Louise showed her gratitude by sneaking Jeff a few sweets!

More than just transport

Research on WRVS community transport across the country shows that for people who use it, the lift itself is only part of the equation. Three of the most highly appreciated benefits were helping to build

and maintain social networks, improving quality of life and expanding opportunity for enjoyment. "We help with transport but it goes an awful lot deeper," says Debbie.

"People should still be able to make choices – to continue their hobbies, pop to the hairdresser or go to the dentist."

But volunteers get so much out of it too. According to Debbie, "It's what everyone gets from it as a team – WRVS, volunteers, service users..." Certainly for volunteer drivers like Howard Cotterell and Lynne Drabble, the scheme is hugely life-enhancing.

"I get pleasure from helping people with poor mobility to enjoy life, so that they can meet others and make friends," says Howard.

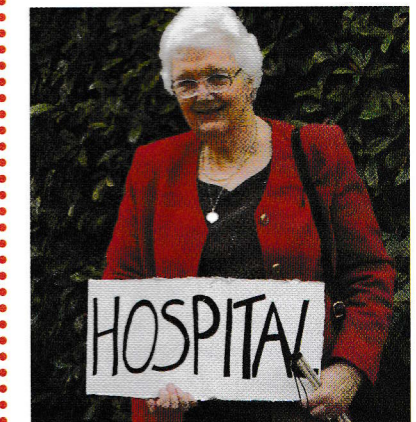
Lynne agrees. "It's marvellous to see everyone interacting, becoming friends. For example, one lady will bake cakes for someone else, and another will knit toys for other's grandchildren. These people aren't just accepting help, they are helping others and forming friendships every single day.

"I feel honoured to do this," continues Lynne. "It enriches my own life. Volunteers are so trusted and I know many people won't get out at all if we don't help them. It's a privilege to bring pleasure to others."

Recruitment

The *Give Us A Lift* campaign was launched in November to raise awareness and drum up more volunteer drivers for transport services nationwide. As campaign manager Ruth Peat says, "Community transport services are about giving people choice and independence. It's all very well giving older people a free bus pass, but if the services aren't there or they can't walk to the bus stop, it's worthless. And that goes for urban and rural areas.

"Anyone with time can help," adds Ruth. "Just one or two hours a week will enable someone to get to the shops, doctor's or a club." Debbie knows how important each one of her 40 volunteers is. "They are exceptional people. They say 'I'm only a volunteer' but there's nothing 'only' about it. Without them this service wouldn't be here."



GET IN TOUCH

Find out more at www.giveusalift.org.uk. Watch the video and pass a link on to your friends and family. To volunteer or donate call 0845 601 4670.