

The Fountain Quay Ladies: Interloch Community Transport provides a broad range of services and support. A picture of this was captured in conversations with a group of Interloch member's living at Fountain Quay. Fountain Quay is a sheltered housing facility on the seafront of Kirn, on the outskirts of Dunoon, and I visited with Interloch's Operations Officer, Cat, in February to hear from the "Fountain Quay Ladies" about their experiences. They all had different stories about the difference Interloch makes to their lives, but there were several common threads. One was the unique blend of transport and care that the service offers, and how it's tailored to their needs. That might mean support boarding the minibus, help going round the supermarket or putting the shopping away, or making sure members can complete the paperwork needed to recover their travel costs after a hospital appointment. I heard comments like "I don't know what I'd do otherwise" and "we'd be lost without them, we really would" from everyone I spoke to. Another point that kept coming up was the importance of the relationship they have with the drivers and office staff. It's clear that this makes a big difference not just to their independence, but to their wellbeing. It's about knowing people as individuals – their names and their specific needs – but also being able to have a laugh and a joke.

Several people also mentioned how Interloch allows them to go about daily tasks or keep up social connections so that they are less reliant on friends or family.

Betty and **Rena** use Interloch to attend a fortnightly Stroke Club at a church in Dunoon. Both have problems with vision due to macular degeneration, and Betty's mobility is limited by osteoporosis in her knees. She can get around using a Rollator within Fountain Quay but needs a wheelchair and ramp when venturing out. As well as the cost of taxis being prohibitive, Betty and Rena both mentioned their struggle to get in and out of them. The doors are too heavy for them to open themselves, but what they find upsetting is that taxi drivers usually won't help unless you ask. In contrast, Rena, Betty and others mentioned the lengths Interloch's drivers will go to help them board, make them comfortable, and details like fastening their seatbelts if they struggle with arthritis or holding their handbag so they can get on and off for themselves.

When we got to visit, we find Rena has popped out to the hall to see where we've got to. Bright and chirpy, you'd hardly believe she is 95, and less still that she is almost completely blind. She has lived at Fountain Quay for 20 years and is very comfortable there, but with her eyesight deteriorating, she can't do the tapestries and crafts she used to enjoy. She describes herself as a shy person, and says that Stroke Club gets her out and about. She also appreciates the independence Interloch offers by taking her round the supermarket for her regular shop. The driver also brings her shopping up the stairs for her, noting that "I can still put it away myself".

Joan, [78] also emphasises how Interloch's specialist service helps her stay independent and play a full part in family life. Joan lost both her legs due to vascular problems and diabetes, but with her electric wheelchair and adaptations to her flat, she can do most things for herself.

The service means she can continue to play a full part in family life, including a trip across to Ayr last year for her son's wedding. She also helps her widowed son with childcare, using the minibus to collect her young grand-daughter to come and stay over with her at Fountain Quay.

Interloch's drivers also make everyday tasks easier, such as shopping or going for an eye test. They know what she can do herself and what she needs help with, and will put groceries through the checkout and help her put them away at home. Joan enjoys the chat and banter. "They are wonderful. So helpful in everything they do" she says, adding with a cheeky grin: "but they know about my diabetes and they'll pull me up if they see me buying sweeties!"

Fiona [79] also mentions how nice it is that the drivers will have a blether with her – "not that awful silence". She uses the bus for hospital appointments and says the drivers make it "like a day out", adding that "they would stop to pick something up from the shops if you asked".

Fiona moved into Fountain Quay three years ago. She was in hospital for a hip replacement when her husband died very suddenly. Without any family nearby, she found it very difficult to manage and things were made worse but recurrent problems with her new hip. She says having Interloch on hand makes her feel less isolated and more independent. She particularly values the flexibility, mentioning a time when she had to book and then cancel an appointment at short notice – "no problem at all. What would we do without them?" she asks. "We love them to bits".

The extra support and knowledge offered by the staff comes up in conversation with several of the ladies. Fiona mentions that driver Campbell recently took her to an appointment for a bone density scan, where he stayed with her throughout and helped her complete the forms needed to claim back her travel costs. These can be significant because most hospital appointments involve a ferry trip to Greenock or Paisley. Also, the claims departments are often hidden away within large, unfamiliar hospital buildings so help of this kind is also invaluable for people with limited mobility or visual problems.

Another resident, **Frances** [72], has dyslexia and says it's a huge help to have someone navigate the paperwork for her. Frances and Rena both mention that they "often forget things". Again, the practical help of having someone making sure you get to the right department or waiting area has a big impact on their wellbeing. "They're brilliant. It definitely makes a difference to your mental health", Frances says. She describes the benefits of this reassurance to her relationships with family. They would help out, she says, but she's aware that they have work commitments and "it's nice not to have to impose on them", or feel like you need to fit in with what they're doing. She laughs: "I'm too independent and I won't be told what to do!" Betty, too, mentions how Interloch reduces her reliance on family. By using the service "mostly for social connections" she says she's able to make save family visits for nice things like going out for a meal together.

Grace and Sophie: Grace is a long term foster mum to Sophie, who is 20. Sophie uses Interloch Transport 4 days a week to get from her village home to her classes with Argyll Social Inclusion and Support Team (ASIST), a 25 minute drive away in Dunoon. Being able to attend ASIST gives Sophie opportunities to socialise with friends and learn life skills. Sophie says she has recently starting doing "Shop, Cook and Eat" where she and ASIST staff will go and do a weekly shop, plan her meals and Sophie will make her lunches from what she's bought. There's also a varied range of activities such as swimming, gardening, arts and crafts and media, as well as things like litter picking and shared dance sessions with a local pre-school group. On her day off she volunteers at the local community centre's weekly social hub, helping with things like buttering the scones and wiping the tables, and joining in with walks or other activities.

The Interloch bus is "instrumental" in Grace's eyes. Sophie has Tsukahara syndrome, a very rare condition which has a range of physical effects, particularly on bones, and also on cognitive development. It wouldn't be safe for Sophie to travel on the bus on her own, but in any case the service doesn't run at suitable hours. With Interloch, Sophie is picked up from home and taken right to ASIST, whereas even when she was still at school, the school bus would only collect and drop her at the road end. Grace often has other foster children at home and her husband, Bob, is in a wheelchair, so the door to door service makes a huge difference. It means they don't need to arrange their day around "standing in the rain waiting for the bus". Having the daily travel routine sorted means Grace can prioritise having time to accompany Sophie to things like medical and dental appointments. Because of the complexity of her condition, these are frequent and are usually across the water at specialists in Inverclyde or Glasgow.

Sophie clearly thrives on the variety of activities she can access at ASIST. When I ask what her favourites are, she can't decide. "I like all of them", she grins. "It's good seeing friends, getting swimming, and doing good things like clearing the junk from the Castle Gardens". She knows all the Interloch drivers now so it's never a surprise, which is important for Sophie – she trusts the service and feels safe with them. "I've actually known Dawn all my life", she says. "And I like Dougie, and Grumpy Alec". Sophie tells me that she enjoys having a chat with the drivers and "finding out everything about them". "She gets answers, too," says Grace. "She's very persistent and she won't give up until the driver has a chat with her!" Another local woman in the village accesses support services in Dunoon and usually shares the bus journey with Sophie.

Foster family life in a rural setting can be complex and Interloch's service has helped in some unexpected ways. Recently, a younger boy called Stephen was staying with the family for a while. It was important for him to be able to visit his mum, who lives in Dunoon. That's where Stephen goes to school but there's no later service after the school bus. Interloch was able to make this possible – Stephen could go round to his mum's after school and be picked up from there to travel home with Sophie once she was finished for the day.

Grace is effusive in her praise for Interloch. "It's essential for her confidence and independence. It would be a huge loss if we didn't have it". But she does worry for the future. She's aware that community transport relies on a patchwork of charitable and local authority funding, and that further cuts could threaten the stability of the service. At present Sophie's transport costs are covered because she is under the care umbrella. Grace explains that there is no provision for her travel costs as an adult, outside of Personal Independence Payment, so when Sophie turns 21 in a few months, everything will need to come out of her Universal Credit. Pick up and drop off by taxi would come in at about £90 per day and Grace is clear that "if it wasn't for Interloch, I can't see how we could afford for her to go".

The service clearly means a lot to Sophie too. She understands that we came to hear her story to help funders understand the value of how Interloch helps people. As we leave, she looks a little worried and asks Grace to check with us - "Am I still going to be able to use the bus?" her worries quickly soothed with a little reassuring chat.

Branching Out case study

Interloch Community Transport has been supporting people across Cowal, Bute and Helensburgh to reconnect with their communities following Covid. We have done this by improving their access to essential medical care, local services, and social appointments – reducing the inequalities that rural living can impose on people with disabilities or living with other challenges.

A great example of how Interloch does this is by providing transport for Branching Out, an outdoor therapeutic programme delivered by Argyll and the Isles Coast and Countryside Trust (ACT) for adults who use mental health services. Over 10-12 weeks they participate in physical, social, environmental and skill-building activities, from outdoor cooking to green woodworking, environmental art and conservation tasks, all in a safe, respectful space where they can chat and share. After completing Branching Out, many return for Moving On, a progression programme that continues to strengthen skills and build independence.

In a rural setting, the logistics of bringing everyone together can be really challenging, and that's where Interloch steps in.

Mark Bamford, known as "Bambi", and his partner Nicola lead the sessions in Cowal and Bambi says "using Interloch is the only way we would be able to deliver Branching Out in this area". In collaboration with local community organisations and charities, they use rural woodland settings such as the Community Forests at Kilfinan and North Bute, and Benmore Botanic Gardens. Public transport links are very limited and lots of participants don't have access to a car. Many wouldn't feel able to use buses anyway – Bambi notes that after Covid, coming to Branching out was the first time some of the group had left the house in a year or more.



Of course, mental and physical health are intertwined, and Interloch's fleet of fully accessible vehicles extends Branching Out's reach to people with more complex health needs. This could involve extra support from the driver to get on and off the bus, or accommodating crutches or wheelchairs. Interloch driver Alex recalls one participant, David, who had both legs amputated, but with the vehicle wheelchair adaptations "I'd just drop the tail ramp and David would go trundling on".

It's more than the logistics of travel though, says Bambi. It's about the relationship that group members have with Alex, and his understanding of their individual needs. Alex will ring round the night before to remind people about the session, and he knows who needs the bus to be there exactly on time to avoid them becoming anxious. He will then help to get people chatting: "on the first day, they don't know each other, they don't know me – everyone's nervous. But by about the third week, it's turned into a social club on wheels". Bambi feels this has been key to making sure people keep coming back on those first few weeks while the bonds form, resulting in fantastic

retention rates. The way he describes it, Branching Out is about building a community, and "Alex has turned the bus into an extension of that community building".

This feeds into the running of the day: both Bambi and Alex mentioned that Alex will often stay for part of the session, and will let them know if anyone was a bit quiet or anxious on the way in and might need some extra support.

Evaluation of the programme is carried out by ACT's Manager Sara, and feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. In 2022-23, they've run Branching Out and Moving On courses on Bute and at Benmore Botanic Gardens. The Benmore group has just finished. Five of the group of twelve have completed feedback forms so far, with all agreeing that the aims "I gained life skills and feel more confident about managing my condition" and "I found social contact, felt less isolated, made friends" were met.

Sara believes that "the travel with Interloch provides part of the day's experience and extends the safe, supportive environment that's so important to people's wellbeing and recovery." these positive sentiments are also reflected in comments, from members of the groups:

"If it wasn't for the bus my Mum wouldn't be able to drop me off and pick me up and I wouldn't be able to come."

"It is the only day I go anywhere apart from shopping and to the doctors. I really look forward to coming."



"I get on the bus and when I get there all my problems are left on there and all I focus on is my day. I get to meet the people that make me feel so much better."

Alex tells me proudly that the bus is now adorned with various items the Branching Out groups have made for him during the sessions. One his favourites seems to sum up the experience well: a wooden plaque that reads



“Enter as strangers...

leave as friends”.