

Short Breaks Project Research visit to Aberdeen – 23rd April 2012

Volunteers from Grampian Opportunities were invited to join the Short Breaks Project research visit to Aberdeen. The purpose of the visit was to test different types of transport and to cooperate with various agencies to see if we could discover new and/or best travel options for people with disabilities. The exercise was to determine how to facilitate successful travel, enabling beneficial experiences for both carers and those they care for. We decided to visit Aberdeen as we could test many types of transport in a single visit.

GO researching volunteers :- Liz Watt, Angie Will, Allan Spence, Barbara Duncan and Denise Cromar. Also attending was Shona Owen, Short Breaks Project coordinator.

INVERURIE TRAIN STATION

The first part of the day involved Liz and Angie getting a taxi to Inverurie Train Station to meet Shona. The Inverurie taxi driver was welcoming and considerate of Angie's needs and arrived in plenty of time to get Angie and Liz to the station. Liz had phoned Scotrail in advance to reserve disabled seating. The staff at Inverurie gave clear information about how they would board us as a group. When they took us on board the train they politely asked passengers who had taken Liz and Angie's spaces to sit elsewhere. We were met by a Scotrail representative at Aberdeen station, who helped Angie off the train and checked we had all the assistance we needed.

STAGECOACH ABERDEEN

Once at Aberdeen we were joined by volunteer Allan Spence and then met Julie Barker, the representative for Stagecoach Bluebird. She arranged to show us two bus types that are wheelchair accessible. We tested both a ramp entry bus and a lift access bus. Any bus that has wheelchair access will have the blue wheelchair symbol at the door. All drivers driving one of these busses should be fully trained in the specific operation of the equipment. Stagecoach advised that if there was ever a problem to note the bus number, the time and place in order that the driver can be traced and re-trained correctly. If you have a ticket, keep it as the best reference. We had previously thought that only 1 wheelchair user could travel on a bus, however, we discovered that if the wheelchair user can transfer to an ordinary seat then more wheelchair user could use the same bus. It is very important that Stagecoach is notified before you travel in order the wheelchair seat is reserved. We discussed that many drivers tend to drive off before people sit down. Julie gave us 'Journey Assistance Cards', credit card sized for you to show to the driver. You can stick on one of 9 different stickers letting the driver know about your needs, e.g. visually impaired 'Sight' sticker or 'Please wait for me to sit down' etc. You can get

more information about this at stagecoachbus.com or from the disability helpdesk - contact 01779 470077.

SCOT RAIL ABERDEEN

Following our Stagecoach visit we went to the train station where we were met by Allan Jones who manages Scotrail operations from Huntley to Dundee. We were shown the two types of trains in operation. Where you might be able to get up to 4 wheelchairs onto an older style train, you would only get the one on the new style train; however this would be more if the user could transfer. The new trains have larger and better disabled toilets. Allan Jones said that train users should register with Scotrail at Fort William (08456 015929) to create an individual profile. This means that for each new booking you make Scotrail have detailed information about your specific requirements. The recommendation is the same as Stagecoach – pre-book your seat/space in advance to guarantee your travel. As a lovely surprise we were invited into the first class lounge for coffee and biscuits.

SHOPMOBILITY/ UNION SQUARE MANAGEMENT

Our next stop was with Katrina Erskine at Shopmobility on the 1st floor of Union Square (01224 254338). We also were joined by Malcolm Brown, Manager of Union Square. Angie thought she would enjoy using a motorised wheelchair but wouldn't be able to do so as there was no hoist facility at Shopmobility to do so. Malcolm Brown told us he had a hoist in the large disabled toilet on the ground floor of the shopping centre, near the bust station. It was decided that an easy and practical solution was for Shopmobility to take a motorised chair and meet Angie to hoist her from 1 chair to another and keep Angie's own chair until she returned. This means as long as Angie brings her own sling, she can go shopping to Union Street and beyond!

JURY'S INN HOTEL

After a busy morning we were happy to stop at Jury's Inn for lunch (01224 381200). However this was a working lunch and we met the manager from Jury's, Mark Payne. We had a discussion about the need for hoists in hotel rooms and were able to pass on information regarding this. As a project team we still have more work to do in this area.

TAXIS TO THE FERRY

We tested the availability of multiple short taxi journeys from Jury's Inn to Northlink Ferries. Rainbow Taxis (01224 725 500) were happy to provide the service and both drivers were very helpful.

NORTHLINK FERRIES

First to arrive at reception were Denise and Barbara, who unfortunately had not been able to join us earlier. Peter Hutchinson, General Manager for Northlink in Aberdeen (08456 000449) introduced himself as well as Fiona Anderson, the shore side representative.

Denise and Barbara investigated the terminal and found the disabled toilets to be very big and clean, as were the public areas. The access to the building was good for wheelchairs and the lifts and ramps were easy to use.

Once the full team was assembled and we were issued with special passes to board we went on the lift, then the long, gentle sloping ramp onto the ship. First we stopped for a photo shoot at reception – very bling! Next we looked at 1 of 4 disabled cabins, 2 of which have tracking hoists. The cabin had a little bit of a bump to get into, however Northlink are having gentler slopes fabricated. It was noted there was not a shower chair suitable for Denise, so it was agreed that Barbara/Denise would send Peter information regarding this. Denise was impressed by the tracking hoist and the fact that there was a separate bed for a carer/companion. The staff were extremely helpful and very keen to have any constructive input to make travel for all as positive an experience as possible. On board Denise loved the luxury and space there were a great many oooo's and ahhhhh's, admiring the spacious corridors, the different restaurants, cinema with special seating for watching and listening, where someone in a wheelchair that cannot transfer can benefit from using the speakers. There were additional recreation areas to meet the needs of various age groups. It also was noted the number of disabled toilets throughout the ship.

The whole team were thoroughly impressed with the facilities and agreed this was the highlight of the day.

Angie said 'It changed my mind to looking at going on a cruise and how a wheelchair user can go on a cruise.'

Barbara said 'It has inspired me to go on a trip with Northlink to Orkney or Shetland.'

Allan reported 'I found there was plenty space throughout the whole ship, the disability cabin was fantastic and I wouldn't worry about travelling on my own'.

Denise said 'I would never have imagined it could be so good – I'm very keen to visit Shetland now. The Northlink staff gave me so much confidence that I could manage this trip. A great many hotels could learn from Northlink!'

After a long but exciting day we all made our way home. Allan in his own car, Shona by bus, Denise, Liz and Barbara by taxi. Angie however hadn't had enough of Aberdeen. She stayed on for a night with the OSMONDS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! But that's another story.....

