



# Problem solvers

Are you facing a community transport problem? Perhaps you're assessing the implications of recent legislation or considering the specifications of a new vehicle. Whatever your community transport poser, *CTA Journal* can help.

Our problem solver, Amanda Eastwood (pictured), is a member of the CTA's advice and information team. Every day the team members field enquiries from across the UK's community transport sector and have

a wealth of knowledge and experience to draw upon.

If you have a problem that you'd like solved on this page, please write to Problem Solvers at *CTA Journal*, Unit 4, 25a Vyner Street, London E2 9DG.

## "We are having difficulty sourcing minibuses suitable for carrying 16 passengers that are within the maximum authorised mass limit that can be driven by volunteer drivers who only hold a B driving licence entitlement – any ideas?"

**D**river's who passed their driving test after 31 December 1996 and have a B entitlement on their licence can drive minibuses (defined as having between nine and 16 passenger seats) if they meet all of the following criteria:

- they have held their B entitlement for two years or more
- they are aged between 21 and 70
- they don't tow a trailer
- they receive no payment or other consideration for driving the vehicle, other than expenses
- the maximum authorised mass (MAM) is 3,500kg for a conventional minibus or 4,250kg for an accessible minibus with a passenger lift or ramp.

It's the last point that is increasingly of concern to the voluntary sector, because the MAM of minibuses has continued to rise since the driving licence rules were changed. Back in 1996, there was no shortage of suitable minibuses within the MAM limits, but today, in order to stay within the minibus manufacturers' stated weight limits, smaller minibuses with reduced passenger capacities (below the 16 that was once the norm) are often required. This trend looks likely to continue as the vans from which the majority of minibuses are converted get heavier in order to meet higher construction and safety requirements as well as the payload demands of the van market.

If operating smaller-capacity minibuses is unappealing, you are faced with two choices:

- 1) Train drivers to obtain a full PCV D1 entitlement, after which they will no longer be restricted to minibuses within the above weight restrictions. This option could cost in excess of £1,500 per driver. (The CTA, through its CommunityDriver scheme, can provide training for just over £900, including test fees.)
- 2) Downrate the MAM of the minibus to 3,500kg or 4,250kg as appropriate.

Downrating a minibus is quite a straightforward process and can literally be as simple as changing the chassis plate to show the reduced MAM. Sometimes minor modifications to the suspension's bump stops are needed to limit the suspension travel to take account of the reduced payload.

Before considering downrating, you need to ascertain that the reduced payload will be sufficient to carry the number of passengers you require. The payload of a van is easy to calculate: you just need to subtract the manufacturer's quoted unladen weight from the MAM figure. With a van-derived minibus you will need to find out what the unladen weight of your minibus will be following the addition of weight during the conversion process. This will probably require a visit to a public weighbridge,

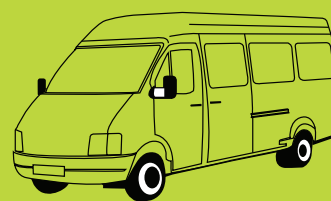
with any equipment normally carried and a full tank of fuel, or the minibus converter should be able to confirm what the unladen weight will be. Subtract this figure from the downrated MAM of 3,500kg or 4,250kg and you will know your payload. But how do you know if this reduced payload is sufficient?

The payload needs to be equal to the combined weights of the driver, the passengers, their belongings and any additional equipment on board. When calculating the payload you can assume 75kg per passenger. (16 passengers + 1 driver @ 75kg each = 1,275kg payload, passengers only.) If you are downrating an accessible 16-seat minibus to 4,250kg, you will require the unladen weight to be a maximum of 2,975kg (4,250kg MAM – 1,275kg payload = 2,975kg unladen weight).

When choosing the specification of a minibus you wish to downrate, you should consider the weight of items you add during the conversion. At least one seat manufacturer is now offering lighter aluminium-framed seats, which will help reduce the unladen weight, to the benefit of the payload.

Remember that overloading a minibus is an offence under the Road Traffic Act 1991, Regulation 41B and The Road Vehicle (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986, so you will need to check and adjust passenger numbers as required. VOSA has the facilities to weigh vehicles at the roadside. ■

### How drivers can check for overloading



Driver + 16 passengers

Desired maximum authorised mass:	4,250kg
Unladen weight of minibus:	2,975kg
Authorised payload would be	1,275kg