

On the buses: mobile safe zones to help vulnerable citizens



A bus service with a difference is to take to the roads of two Scottish cities with the aim of helping vulnerable members of the public.

The Safe Zone buses – providing modern and comprehensive first aid / medical facilities and safe havens created to meet the needs of people who are out in city centres – will become a familiar sight on the streets of Edinburgh and Dundee. One of the buses already operates in Glasgow.

The new buses in Edinburgh and Dundee will become operational from tomorrow night (Dec 20) – traditionally one of the busiest nights of the year for police and ambulance personnel due to the numbers of people in towns and cities celebrating the festive season – but will operate all year round at weekends.

Ambulance and Police personnel will work with volunteers from a range of charity groups on the single-decker coaches to keep people safe when they become vulnerable for a variety of reasons – through substance abuse or consumption, injury, domestic abuse or other kinds of emotional distress.

The buses will operate between 10pm and 4am – traditionally the peak demand period for police and paramedics – and will provide an initial place of support to those who might otherwise end up in police custody or Accident & Emergency.

The buses are a funded partnership between Police Scotland, the Scottish Ambulance Service and Scottish Government.

Charities including the British Red Cross, Working on Wheels, Crew 2000, Tayside and Glasgow Councils on Alcohol are also heavily involved in supporting the venture as are local authorities in Dundee and Edinburgh. The service is also backed by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

The service was introduced in Glasgow in December 2011 with the aim of providing a range of support and intervention.

During the first six months of 2013 there were a total of 500 visitors who received alcohol support via the bus service in Glasgow. More than half of those who were provided with support were women aged between 19 and 45 years old.

Assistant Chief Constable Wayne Mawson, who has helped coordinate the project, said: "This service provides people who are often at their most vulnerable, for a variety of reasons, with direct and immediate support when it is needed.

"The buses and the personnel working on them will act as a first point of contact and will be able to provide a range of support – from initial first aid to referrals to agencies which can help further if required.

"Traditionally the last Friday before Christmas is a hectic night for a range of agencies, not least the emergency services. There are many reasons why members of the public may become vulnerable and require the immediate support of someone who can assist. That's what the presence of these buses and the crews on them are there to provide – direct and immediate help to keep people safe. They are not just places for people to go to sober up. People may find themselves in the bus through vulnerability and in need of being looked after in the short term and given support for the longer term."

The buses are supported by a mobile patrol vehicle which operates in tandem and which provides a link between activity on the streets and the services available on the coaches.

ACC Mawson added: "Safe Zone buses are the epitome of an integrated partnership approach to help keep people safe at the same time as reducing the demand on emergency services at peak times. This allows our resources to be more effectively deployed to ensure public safety and I hope these buses will become a fully-integrated and essential part of the night-time economies of Dundee and Edinburgh, as they have elsewhere."

Pauline Howie, Chief Executive, Scottish Ambulance Service, said: "Our key priority is to keep people safe and ensure that those who need medical care receive the most appropriate treatment. Ambulance staff will assess and treat those vulnerable patients, arranging transfer to hospital for appropriate cases and reducing attendance at A&E departments for those that can be treated at the bus because they have a minor injury or have simply over indulged."

Minister for Public Health Michael Matheson said: "This weekend will be exceptionally busy for our hard working emergency services and we need to work together to keep people safe. That's why the Scottish Government is investing £120,000 to support the setup of Safe Zone Buses in Dundee and Edinburgh.

"As well as a first aid facility, the bus will support individuals and help them cut down on their drinking. Safety zones will help treat incidents and provide assistance to anyone who needs it. A service like this is only possible through the collaboration of multiple agencies and the contribution of the voluntary sector.

"Too many people in Scotland die because of the long term effects of alcohol. We must take every opportunity to reduce the damage caused by Scotland's unhealthy attitude to alcohol."