Adapted car fleet for disabled drivers stolen from charity

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Members of the Wessex DriveAbility team outside their Southampton headquarters before the theft of their adapted car fleet.

Wessex Driveability charity team devastated by the heartless theft of their entire fleet of adapted cars for disabled drivers, from their

Southampton base…

Wessex DriveAbility, part of the Driving Mobility network of assessment centres, has been left unable to help disabled drivers regain independence following the theft of its specialist fleet of modified vehicles.

Wessex DriveAbility's main assessment centre is based in Kent Road, Southampton, with outreach locations in Basingstoke, Salisbury, Ferndown, and the Isle of Wright. Its team of Approved Driving Instructors (ADIs), Occupational Therapists and Administrators provide 'fitness to drive' driving assessments for elderly and disabled people who self-refer or are signposted from the DVLA, Motability, NHS, and Police. This charity- funded team ensures drivers are safe to continue driving and provide clinical recommendations regarding adapted driving controls and wheelchair accessible vehicles.

With criminals breaking into their headquarters this week and stealing the charity's complete fleet of specialist vehicles, Wessex DriveAbility can no longer help disabled drivers or continue to tackle the large backlog of assessment requests caused by the pandemic. All the centre staff are shocked by this theft and have been left questioning why criminals would take such specialist, niche vehicles.

Rachel Odell, Wessex DriveAbility Centre Manager, comments: "Discovering our fleet of cars had been taken during Monday night was an awful shock to all of us. We are so confused with how and why these modified cars would be stolen as they are specially designed and modified for drivers with restricted mobility. We are a non-profit charity which is part of a larger national charity called Driving Mobility and are really worried we might not be able to replace certain custom-made controls we had fitted in vehicles. Now we have no specialist vehicles for assessing, drivers desperate to regain their freedom will potentially have to wait a considerate length of time before we can see them. This couldn't have come at a worse possible time with the huge demand on our service right now. My team and I are absolutely appalled by the selfish nature of this act which will impact so many disabled people and their families"

Five adapted vehicles were stolen from Wessex DriveAbility with many conspicuous additions such as wheelchair rooftop boxes. The centre is appealing for witnesses to come forward who may have seen any suspicious activity on the evening of Monday 8th November. The thieves broke into the building using considerable force – smashing fire doors, alarms and safes to access car keys. Luckily no staff were on site or injured during the break-in. Curiously the centre's standard vehicles were left untouched which adds further confusion to the motive of this crime.

Laura Holley, Driving Assessor and ADI, concludes: "We might be wrong however it appears that the criminals were scoping our property for some time as they knew exactly where to access keys and at the right time. Plus, they must have had some knowledge of adapted driving as our cars were fitted with modified steering controls, such as push-pull hand levers for acceleration and braking – these did not seem to hinder them. Our cars were unique and specialist so not easy to sell on as a whole. We hope the offenders are apprehended quickly for this awful crime. In the meantime, we are now 100% focused on limiting the impact on our services as much as possible and replacing our fleet as best we can. When you are so passionate about helping disabled people, it is heart breaking for something like this to happen. As we are a charity, funds and time are always limited so this is a massive blow. If anybody from the local community can help us in anyway, we'd be so grateful."

Please keep an eye out for any of these specialist vehicles and if you spot them, or have any information that may help, please contact the police.

Driving Mobility, supported by the Department for Transport

As a registered charity, Driving Mobility accredits a network of 21 driving assessment centres covering
the whole of the UK. Many with outreach facilities, these centres include independent charities and NHS centres which offer professional information and assessment so disabled and elderly people can gain or retain independence.

Driving Mobility ensures that there are common standards, promotes good practice and offers training and education to all regional centres, whilst working closely with associated national organisations. These include the Department for Transport, Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, Driver and Vehicle Agency (NI), Motability and the Police, along with many other valued stakeholders.

Driving Mobility is privileged to have Baroness Thomas of Winchester as their patron and is supported by HM Government.