Wessex DriveAbility back on track with much help, following devastating theft; good news at last!

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Learnain House

Ben Chapman of Chapman Car Care with the replacement vehicle he adapted free of charge for Wessex DriveAbility.

Southampton-based Wessex DriveAbility disabled drivers assessment centre suffered a heartbreaking theft of their vehicles but thankfully are back in business thanks to kind support from many…

Following the theft of most of its specialist fleet of modified vehicles (as reported on 12th November 2021 on Wheels-Alive), the Southampton-based Wessex DriveAbility charity has reopened its disabled driver assessment services thanks to donations from local and national companies.

Operating as a charity, Wessex DriveAbility is part of the national network of Driving Mobility Assessment Centres. Its team of Approved Driving Instructors (ADIs) and Occupational Therapists 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 committed team ensure drivers are safe to continue driving and provide clinical recommendations regarding adapted driving controls and wheelchair accessible vehicles.

With the majority of their specialist vehicles stolen following an aggressive break-in, the centre was unable to provide vital support for drivers seeking independence. Nevertheless, through the determination of Rachel Odell, Centre Manager and her team, Wessex have been able to restart services once more aided by donations from national adaptation equipment suppliers – all coordinated and fitted for free by Chapman Car Care, also based in Southampton.

Ben Chapman is Managing Director at Chapman Car Care. This family-run business was set up by Ben's father in 1980 and is a Motability Approved Adaptation Installer specialising in vehicle adaptations for disabled drivers, passengers and driving instructors. Ben has also been a Trustee of Wessex DriveAbility for over four years so when he heard the news of the break-in, he immediately visited the centre to see how he could help.

Ben explains: “I was shocked and sickened when I saw what had happened, there was broken glass everywhere and the Wessex team were all in shock. This was such an awful crime that would impact on so many people with disabilities. Without any assessment cars and as a charity, could this be the end of Wessex? We had to do something. Within a few hours I had managed to contact a few of our main vehicle adaptation manufacturers who kindly offered to donate a range of equipment. Once Rachel had managed to organise delivery of a replacement Ford C-Max following a challenging insurance pay out, I fitted all the control systems free of charge. Giving up my time for free was the least I could do to help Wessex, especially as we’ve had such a strong commercial relationship for many years.”

As this new vehicle is fitted with a large range of adaptations it provides a highly flexible solution suitable for a wide variety of drivers. This has been crucial to get services back up and running as of the five vehicles stolen, two are still missing and two are undergoing investigation. Unbelievably one of these cars was written off in a recovery yard accident and another spotted parked near the centre with fake numberplates.

Rachel is so grateful to everyone who has supported Wessex during this difficult time as she concludes: “Through kind equipment donations from Jeff Gosling Hand Controls, Lodgesons, Elap and Kivi, we are back clinically assessing and signposting disabled drivers. With the demand for our services already stretched due to the pandemic, this theft could not have come at a worse time. However, with help from companies such as Chapman Car Care, we have been able to get back on our feet. We are all so appreciative. Ben Chapman has been absolutely amazing making all of this happen, especially as the new car he has fitted out contains so much specialist equipment. Despite numerous setbacks, we continue striving to replace the other vehicles and have already installed more robust security at the centre. The Wessex team and I are feeling more positive about the future now and are delighted to be seeing once more the positive outcomes we achieve.”

More about 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.