



Press release

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## **APLICOM VEHICLE COMPUTERS BRING NEW PUBLIC TRANSPORT OPPORTUNITIES TO RURAL GLOUCESTERSHIRE**

In-vehicle computer communications are getting rural public transport in south Gloucestershire just where and when the passengers want it.

The Government-sponsored Village Link scheme hopes to show how advanced telematics technology can provide a viable and practical solution to rural public transport. It is controlled and managed by Gloucestershire County Council's Environment Department, and operated by a network of several private companies, each providing a vital link in the total scheme. Telematics allows remote monitoring and tracking as well as interactive data transmission – so drivers can receive instructions without having to resort to mobile phones or other distractions while they are driving.

On-board computers with dashboard-mounted key pads and ergonomically designed, dashboard mounted, easily read screens – designed and manufactured by Aplicom of Finland – have been installed in three new Village Link minibuses. Aplicom vehicle computers are also installed in the 'trunk route' Stagecoach buses that operate on the main service route between Gloucester and Dursley, and which provide a link service for the minibuses.

The whole operation is developed around the MobiRouter software system from Mobisoft UK, an Aplicom 'system partner'. The communications software transmits and receives data from the buses and minibuses through a private call centre, Message Link, based in Gloucester – which also currently provides call centre timetable services for the conventional bus services in the county. Mobisoft has also provided a turnkey solution, installing a computer and monitor for the call centre that operates of the Village Link scheme.

The Aplicom vehicle computers from the ICA-series range have had additional software functionality installed so that the drivers of the buses and minibuses can communicate information on possible delays and arrival times to the call centre.

Village Link initially involves three new Rohill Harriers 16-seat minibuses on Renault chassis. These have been purchased by the council and are operated by local bus company Swanbrook. This is the first time that Swanbrook drivers have used in-cab monitors or keypads and the results have been overwhelmingly positive, says Swanbrook partner Keith Thomas. The screens are easy to read, the information is clear, precise and understandable and the whole system is easy to operate, he adds.

Mike Taplin, the Council's Transport Services Manager, says that the scheme was designed to encourage more use of public transport – and less of private cars – and to address the problems of social exclusion. It is in this second area where the most immediate benefit will be felt, he says.

"Village Link provides a vital service for the elderly, and those with disabilities or mobility problems, for example, sight impairments, as well as parents with pushchairs and prams. A simple telephone call from home establishes when and where the minibus will pick up the passenger, and the connection to the trunk service is confirmed at the same time."

The initial bid for the money and the co-ordination of the project was undertaken by Halcrow, team-transport planning consultants to Gloucester County Council. Project Co-ordinator Graham Dean said that, while there were already a few similar schemes in the UK, Gloucester Village Link was the most ambitious so far in terms of the flexibility of the service, with connections to a main inter-urban bus service.

Finance is provided by a DETR grant of about £1 million, on top of the annual public transport subsidy from the government of over £1.6 million. In 1997 the Government provided a subsidy of £800,000 to Gloucestershire and this was nearly doubled in 1998 to allow the council to use conventional bus services – with set routes, large coaches and a set timetable – to provide rural services. However, in 1999 the Rural Bus Challenge was announced, offering councils grant for ideas to improve rural public transport, make it more cost effective and reduce the pollution of large vehicles travelling country lanes with few passengers.

The initial £20 million 'pot' has since grown to more than £42 million as councils in different areas of the UK recognise the value of using and adapting advanced communications technology in the public transport industry.

Research in Gloucestershire revealed that while the main towns were connected with commercial services – which could be profitable for the private operators – the rural service was close to non-existent. The solution was to set up a system linking the villages, and this proposal was accepted by the DETR and eventually received a £1m grant.

Three purpose-built vehicles were purchased, each with special flooring so that there are no steps, and each has a manually operated ramp for wheelchairs. The new vehicles are capable of carrying 16 passengers including a wheelchair.

Village Link operates a Demand Responsive Transport system using Mobisoft's MobiRouter system. Prospective passengers' requirements are keyed in to the computer at the call centre and the MobiRouter software automatically interrogates the information along with that already held in the 'timetable', and the passenger is then included in the Village Link route for the next day. This information is stored and communicated to the Aplicom vehicle computer where it is displayed on the screen for the driver as soon as he logs in ready for the day's journeys. Village Link includes some sections of set routing and other areas which may be included if there is demand – offering very high levels of flexibility and productivity and making the service more economic.

Two minibuses operate the northern and southern sections, linking with the Stagecoach hourly service for passengers wishing to travel to the major towns. The third vehicle is used for a conventional service providing some of the villages with a rush hour service to and from Gloucester. This vehicle is also fully equipped and available for use on the Village Link service as support for vehicles being serviced.

The Southern Vale of Gloucestershire includes several of the most picturesque and sought after residential areas in the UK, as well as farms and remote cottages. Village Link introduces a new, high level of public transport at a cost that is both economic for the passenger and viable for the County Council and bus operators.