

# Community transport

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Community transport refers to many diverse transport schemes that operate across the UK. These schemes are run by the not-for-profit sector and are primarily volunteer-run. Focusing on results from a study set in Oxfordshire, this report positions community transport within the wider set of transport services available in the UK.

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## 1. What is community transport?

Across the United Kingdom, a vast network of community transport organisations provides informal, low cost, flexible, and accessible mobility to thousands of people, most of whom are older, isolated, and/or have a disability. Community transport aims to meet local transport needs that are not met by conventional commercial or public sector transport. Community transport also differs from conventional transport in that it follows a not-for-profit and community-based model, and in most cases is volunteer run and managed.

Many diverse community transport schemes exist across the UK. In 2012, 1,900 community transport organisations operated in England alone. In Oxfordshire, 80 community transport schemes are listed in the Community Transport Directory. This network of community transport schemes supports people's mobility across the country; in 2020-2021, community transport delivered over 70,000 passenger trips across the UK.

Two broad types of community transport schemes exist in Oxfordshire:

### **Community minibus schemes:**

These schemes provide motorised transport in small buses owned by a community transport organisation. Community minibus schemes operate on permits that exempt not for profit organisations from needing a public service vehicle operator licence (see Box 1).

### **Voluntary car schemes (VCS):**

These schemes typically provide lifts to passengers in the volunteer driver's personal vehicle. Passengers must book ahead and often pay a mileage fee. Most schemes restrict the destinations eligible, with health-related destinations being the most popular (hospitals, GPs, dentists). These schemes tend to be small-scale and fully volunteer-run.

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### Box 1: Definitions

Section 22 permits of the Transport Act 1985 allow the operation of vehicles carrying nine or more passengers of the general public on a not-for-profit basis where no commercial routes exist.

Rather than operating for the public on a fixed route following a schedule, Section 19 permits are used to carry restricted groups of passengers on a pre-booked flexible route

This report draws on a study completed between May-September 2022 (see Box 2). Though the focus is on Oxfordshire, many of the findings are transferable to other UK contexts, and beyond.

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### Box 2: Schemes in Oxfordshire

The 80 community transport schemes operating in Oxfordshire were identified through the Community Transport Directory, a list of schemes compiled by the Oxfordshire County Council, and invited to take part this study.

Participants were invited to complete a semi-structured interview on their community transport schemes. Interviews were supplemented with an analysis of the scheme's policy documents and observations.



## 2. What services does community transport provide?

Community transport provides more than transport: it is a value-creating activity for all involved. For instance, community transport provides a space to connect with the community, and to build relationships. Volunteers can also informally check-in on people. VCS drivers often comfort people who are nervous about their upcoming hospital appointment. In this way, community transport can be a tool to prevent social isolation.

“We see ourselves not so much as a transport company, but as a social service.”

The transport it does provide fills an important gap for those with no (or few) other options, especially older people living in rural areas. Without community transport, many people would have unmet travel needs and be more socially isolated. In this way, community transport addresses an important need amongst many older adults living rurally in the United Kingdom.

“For people who use community transport, I mean, they say this all the time. It's a lifeline. It is literally their only option.”

The transport provided by these schemes also differs from that of conventional transport, in that it is:

- Affordable
- Functionally accessible, and
- Flexible

In this way, community transport schemes go above and beyond providing transport from A to B.





## Affordable transport

Community transport schemes provide affordable mobility. Community minibuses do charge fares, but only for those without a concessionary bus pass, and these fares are low.

“ We charge fares, which are very low, but we do charge fares. For 95% of our passengers, they have a concessionary bus pass, so they don't actually pay anything.”

Most VCS charge a mileage rate, but this still results in very affordable trips, especially when compared to other options such as taxis.

## Functionally accessible transport

Community transport is not always technically accessible: many schemes do not officially accommodate people with disabilities by, for example, transporting people in wheelchairs in an official capacity. While community buses that cannot accommodate wheelchairs are technically inaccessible, they still emerged as often providing a service that is more functionally accessible than conventional transport. For instance, they would plan their routes to drop people off at the door of destinations and help them on/off the bus.

Approximately half of the VCS included in this study accommodate wheelchairs. Though most were not technically accessible because they cannot accommodate wheelchairs, they all mentioned the ways in which they were functionally accessible, namely (when needed) they help people into their cars, and then into their destinations. In this way, rather than transporting people from A to B, they provide transport out of A and into B.

## Flexible transport

Community transport is also more flexible than conventional transport. VCS not only provide a door-to-door service, they also (as discussed above) help passengers navigate mobility at their trips' origins and destinations. Community Minibuses, even those running on a fixed route, also provide more flexible and holistic transport to passengers. They often stop in front of people's homes, meaning the passengers do not need to walk to a bus stop, and tend to offer to carry people's groceries into/off the bus. They also design their route to best suit older adults' needs by connecting residential areas to shopping and social destinations.



### 3. What work does community transport require?

Operating community transport requires work. The driver role requires ample time, as well as physical and emotional labour. The physical work can involve carrying walkers, groceries, and helping people into and out of vehicles. Emotional labour involves supporting older people who are nervous about health appointments and grieving when routine passengers pass away. The largest commitment of the position, however, is time. Most trips require a minimum of three hours, usually during the working day. The coordinator role also requires ample time and logistic labour.

In most schemes, this work is unpaid and done by volunteers. Drivers, then, even when paid, do not primarily do this labour for the money. Instead, they do it to give back to the community.

This results in a unique labour force. Indeed, all community transport schemes included in this study were predominantly run by older adults. The volunteer labour required was perfectly suited for those who were not only retired, but those were specifically recently retired. Indeed, many schemes shared their concern that their volunteer pool was rapidly ageing, many of them were even retiring from their retirement volunteer commitments due to health challenges or discomfort with their ability to drive.

### 4. Why does community transport exist?

Community transport often emerges when community members take it upon themselves to fill a 'gap' left by:

- Funding cuts, and
- Increased car dependence.

#### Funding cuts

Many communities, especially those in village settings, are experiencing reduced bus service due to funding cuts. Cuts to patient transport offered by the National Health Service (NHS) were also identified as affecting the need for community transport.

“A lot of the villages no longer have a local bus service because the funding has been withdrawn.”

Indeed, many community minibus schemes emerged as a direct response to a lack of bus service caused by funding cuts (4 of the 7 in this study) or have changed their routes to replace rural buses that have been discontinued due to cuts (2 of the 7). VCS were also rolled out in response to a more general increased need for transport.

“Well, I used to have a £3.2-million budget. Now I have £0.”

Many schemes are also now facing cuts of their own. This is particularly the case for community minibuses. Three of the seven in this study recently had their funding cut drastically. The other four never had stable streams of government funding: they have always stayed afloat by receiving a patchwork of small funding from diverse places including grants, private fundraising, and donations from corporations, charities, trusts, and private citizens. Ample labour is required to acquire this funding.

The VCS operate on such minimal budgets that they have no funding to cut back. What they instead contend with is an ever-increasing demand in rides and a constant concern about being able to meet that demand through volunteer labour.

## Car dependence

Many reinforcing processes that prioritise car use and hinder the use of any alternative modes emerged as increasing the need for community transport.

One frequently mentioned process was reduced bus service, discussed above. When a service is reduced, the resulting schedule is often so poor and inconvenient, that people opt to drive, resulting in even fewer bus passengers. A vicious circle emerges where more and more people use private cars, resulting in less bus use (and less profit), which causes cuts in service, which further worsens the bus system, and pushes even more people to use private cars.

“The marketplace used to be the centre of town.”

A second process that has contributed to car dependence in rural parts of the UK is suburbanisation. Interviewees noted how new housing and shopping development tend to be taking place outside of the centre of town, around built environments that encourage car use.

Community transport has emerged as a car-based ‘solution’ to funding cuts in increasingly car-centric areas. Indeed, schemes struggle in places attempting to curb car dependence, in this study, the City of Oxford. In fact, only three schemes ran in the City of Oxford, and since this study two have shut down. This is partially explained by the difficulty of driving in Oxford compared to towns and villages.

## 5. What challenges does community transport face?

### #1 Driver recruitment

Across all schemes considered in the study, driver recruitment was the key challenge that stood out. Given the labour required, and the unique volunteer base suited to this position, this is perhaps unsurprising. This difficulty recruiting volunteers meant many organisations were stretched. They must balance their size, as it is easy to become overwhelmed.

“We sooo need more drivers. Because we’ve got these great few people who do everything. But take one of those [away], you really are struggling.”

The few VCS that did not mention struggles with volunteer recruitment stated they kept their operations small and informal on purpose. Others have moved towards prioritising certain trips to make demand levels manageable. The most common way to make the CT service manageable is to restrict which destinations and people are eligible. In terms of destinations, medical appointments were generally prioritised. While many schemes wanted to expand their eligible destinations, they simply did not have the capacity. Though VCS often stated only those with “no other options” were eligible, this was never formally regulated.

“We’re stretched. We haven’t got many volunteers.”

## #2 Funding and fees

Among community minibuses, funding was the second most common issue shared. Large minibus schemes with paid employees have been experiencing funding cuts, making it increasingly difficult to operate. Even amongst schemes that are fully volunteer run, securing funding to replace buses could be challenging.

Most organisations rely on a patchwork of funding options to do so. This means that ample labour can be required to acquire funding.

## #3 Regulations

Amongst community minibuses, a driver must have a D1 license to drive, which requires costly certification. Because people with drivers' licenses from before 1997 have grandfather rights for a D1 license, most community minibus schemes have circumvented these costly licenses. However, there is now concern that finding volunteers with driving licenses from before 1997 will get increasingly difficult.

Amongst VCS, the current non-taxable mileage fee of 45p/mile was identified as too low. Specifically, some schemes worried the costs involved do not cover the current costs of driving many cars, especially given the recent increase in fuel prices, meaning volunteers are often left giving not only their time, but paying out of pocket for the rides given. Allowing VCS to charge more without being taxed would give these organisations flexibility in how much they wish to charge.





## #4 Parking at hospitals

Parking at hospitals was raised as something which could be a challenge for VCS, had it not been for efforts across schemes to ensure arrangements with hospitals were made to allow volunteers to park for free (usually through parking badges). Another issue raised was the lack of coordination between hospital authorities, the Oxfordshire County Council (which has recently stopped providing Blue Badges (a parking scheme for people with disabilities) to community transport organizations), and community transport organisations.

## #5 Administrative burden

The large administrative work required to run community transport schemes, especially community minibuses or large-scale VCS was identified as a challenge. Supporting organizations such as Community First Oxfordshire, Volunteer Link up, and the Community Transport Association were identified as key in reducing this barrier.

## 6. How can community transport be supported?

Community transport clearly provides an important service to those with no (or few) other transport options. Given its benefits, it should be better supported by different stakeholders, including:

### Community Transport Providers

Community transport should not be expected to meet all transport needs. Providers should keep their operations manageable to ensure they do not overextend their organisation. There is also potential for experimentation with different service models, especially amongst community minibus schemes, including social enterprise.

### Community Organisations

Supporting organisations including Community First Oxfordshire, Volunteer Link Up, and the Community Transport Association play a key role in assisting community transport schemes with their administrative work. They should be financially backed to continue to provide this support.

### Hospital Trusts

Hospital trusts should see community transport as partners and integrate schemes into operations, most notably parking. There is also need for greater communication and cooperation between hospitals trusts.

### Local government

Local government can better support community transport by ensuring it is adequately funded. Greater cooperation between local authorities is also needed as schemes operate across jurisdictions.

Curbing suburban development would also help reduce car-dependence and reduce the need for community transport in the long-term.

## National government

The most significant changes must take place at the national level. National government can support community transport by increasing the year of the grandfather rights for D1 licenses (discussed above) and by increasing the non-taxable mileage schemes can charge (currently 45p/mile).

“All these buses that went, they immediately went [...] why can't the commuter transport scale up? [...] when a commercial service couldn't possibly make it financially feasible! It's very odd.”

Because community transport emerged to respond to a need created by cuts in rural transport services (bus subsidies and the NHS patient transport), these funding cuts should be reversed. The privatization of bus services should also be reconsidered, in the medium to long term. This is because privatization has negatively impacted rural communities and continues to put pressure on community transport.

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## Transport Studies Unit


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Since 1973 the Transport Studies Unit (TSU) has established an international research reputation in transport research.

Based within the world-leading School of Geography and the Environment at the University of Oxford, the TSU approaches global transport challenges from social science and holistic perspectives. This approach allows TSU researchers to ask questions that might not be asked in other sectors, building a comprehensive picture of the complex challenges facing transport today and in the future. Our position within Geography and the University fosters interdisciplinary collaboration with researchers in other parts of the University and based elsewhere.

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