Introduction

Over the past 20 years or more, the community transport sector has grown and developed to become a major provider of necessary and vital transport services to many millions of people across the country. Each year approximately 10 million passengers use some form of community transport making some 25 million journeys[1]. Passengers include local residents, members of voluntary and community sector organisations, schools, colleges and local authorities who benefit from door-to-door transport services. In meeting the diverse range of user needs, there are a whole range of types of services provided under the umbrella of community transport. These include, minibus projects; dial-a-ride and dial-a-bus services; community bus services; social car schemes; wheels to work projects; plusbus and shopmobility.

However, the significance of the community transport sector extends beyond transport service provision. In this issue, Local Work seeks to explore the community transport sector. Firstly, we will explore what the community transport sector is; secondly, how community transport can contribute to tackling social exclusion through improving transport provision; and finally, how it can deliver a sustainable future for the sector.

Not just A to B: The role and ethos of community transport

It is acknowledged that the sector is a significant player as a transport operator, yet it is unlike any other transport service provider. While the core function of the sector is the provision of transport services there are a set of wider contextual factors, which makes the sector and individual organisations distinctive. This section of the article will explore the distinctiveness of community transport and how this informs the sector's approach to serving the millions of users annually.

It is the set of shared common goals, values, and overall approach to service provision amongst the members of the Community Transport Association (CTA)[2] and the wider sector, that epitomises the broader focus compared to other transport operators. Combined with these goals is the work of the CTA itself as an advocacy and lobbying organisation for its constituent members. Thus, it can be said the community transport sector is as much a movement as it is simply a service provider.

Inclusivity is the central and most fundamental value within the community transport sector. Inclusivity within this context refers to the guarantee that nobody within a community should be excluded from access to services or amenities because of a lack of appropriate transport. It is this underlying principle that explains why community transport remains distinctive from other operators.

Initially, community transport emerged piecemeal and sporadically as a series of individual schemes and organisations, with the purpose of serving the transport needs of the local community. For the most part, it was the poor quality of transport provision offered by the more 'traditional' service providers that was the driving force behind the emergence of many community transport schemes. Often these transport providers were either the cause of problems or they chose to simply ignore the problems that existed. Thus, these community transport schemes can be looked upon as the local community and voluntary organisations taking responsibility for developing services to address transport problems.

To be able to better meet the needs of local people, community transport goes through a particular process which is to firstly identify the full range of unmet needs amongst all sections of the community; secondly design transport services in response to the specific

TACKLING SOCIAL EXCLUSION THROUGH COMMUNITY TRANSPORT

By Community Transport Association

Author: Daniel Shepherd
Advice Services Manager, Community Transport Association
Tel: 0845 130 6195
E-mail: daniel@communitytransport.com

Edited by. Stuart MacDonald
Policy & Information Researcher, CLES
Tel: 0161 233 1924
E-mail: stuartmacdonald@cles.org.uk

needs and thirdly find the necessary funding in order to support and operate these services[3].

Having a set of values, a needs-based approach to service planning and a lead organisation from the community and voluntary sector, are integral to the distinctiveness of the sector but have also influenced the form community transport organisations take. The common characteristics that define community transport organisations as an identifiable entity are:

1) many community transport schemes and organisations are non-statutory and operate on a not-for-profit basis;
2) the services operate at a local/community level;
3) community-owned and managed, supported by paid-staff and volunteers;
4) services are demand-responsive and operate on a door-to-door basis.

A more practical example of how a community transport scheme operates is reflected in the case study below from the West Midlands.

West Midlands Special Needs Transport[4]

West Midlands Special Needs Transport (WMSNT) has a turnover of nearly £12 million and provides over just over 2 million passenger trips a year, making it by far the biggest community transport organisation in the UK. Employing up to 600 staff WMSNT provides 137 vehicles for ring and ride, another 128 for home-to-school trips for children with special educational needs, patient transport service contracts, demand-responsive transport and registered local bus services. On this scale WMSNT resembles a bus company rather than a voluntary organisation, yet it is a company limited by guarantee with charitable status.

Starting as a single mini-bus operation in the 1980s, the main tenet of the organisation has been "[to] provide door-to-door accessible transport for those who find it difficult or impossible to use conventional public transport". One of the major challenges facing WMSNT is its ability to grow beyond its current size and capacity. At present it is estimated that that the organisation reaches just under 2% of the population in the West Midlands but this still someway short of the 10 per cent of people that have some form of mobility impairment that makes ordinary public transport inaccessible.

Access to sufficient levels of core funding is one factor holding back the growth of the organisation. In response to this situation WMSNT sought and won large-scale contracts providing services, for example, for the City Council's Education Department. This diversification of activity has produced additional benefits for the charity in terms of the vehicles having a dual use - with the vehicles being used to boost the ring and ride provision outside of the school run hours.

Tackling the barriers to social exclusion

Reliable, high quality transport networks are the lifeblood of rural and urban communities. However, there is a growing body of research highlighting how poor quality and the inaccessibility of transport, can impact negatively on an individual's and communities' quality of life, their economic and social opportunities, and the types of activities they can engage in. To this end poor, quality and ineffective transport services can act as a barrier to people breaking the cycle of social exclusion.

As a response the government, over the past seven years, has emphasised the need to tackle the causes and effects of social exclusion. For example, the government's Urban White Paper[5] offered the prospect of revitalised urban communities and the chance for social excluded people and communities to participate in prosperity. The White Paper identified transport systems as one of the barriers to be overcome; as for some marginalised groups transport services may not be affordable, accessible, acceptable or available.

More recently, in 2003 the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) published a report, *Making the Connections[6]*. This report reflects on the growing recognition of how transport problems can reinforce people's exclusion from mainstream society, across a whole range of areas - employment, education, health, and social and cultural activities. The research found a number of factors that often result in people being unable to access services. These factors, which reinforce the findings in the Urban White Paper included, low incomes, bus routes that do go to the right places at the right times and people's age or a disability.

Many people take for granted journeys to work, to see friends, to go shopping, attend healthcare appointments, to access education, or to use leisure facilities. Unfortunately, not all people have the same opportunities, especially those in isolated rural, deprived urban areas or marginalised groups. For example, in a recent survey amongst people with disabilities, 23%[7] said they had to turn down job opportunities due to a lack of transport. To a certain extent therefore, transport can determine people's economic and social opportunities. The persistence of these transport problems, in particular accessibility, can for example, impact adversely, on an individual and stop them from breaking out of the cycle of exclusion.

It is in the provision of services that community transport organisations can tackle some of the exclusionary barriers created by poor transport systems. The remainder of this section will focus on how community transport schemes can bring about added-value services, at the same time as helping public bodies shape their services to the needs of disadvantaged groups and individuals. There are the following four aspects[8]:

1) *Responsiveness to emerging transport needs* - this responsiveness is founded on strong community links and by tapping into formal and informal neighbourhood networks by community transport schemes. Certain benefits can be derived from such close links with the local community. These are 'soft' outputs that can be achieved through community transport, such as community involvement, capacity building, supporting people into the labour market as well as strengthening the wider voluntary sector. At the same time there are benefits to be attained through community transport organisations, like the CTA, by informing and influencing, through their links with statutory agencies, the development of new strategies and services.

2) *Volunteering* - the level and importance of volunteering, which is integral to the ability of the sector to deliver a wide-range of services, as the wellspring of community ownership and responsiveness to needs. Volunteers are motivated by values based on 'putting something in' and seeing tangible results. They bring sensitivity, good humour and, with guidance and training, an attention to detail that can determine the long-term interests of the community and the scheme.

3) *Diversity of use and provision* - when a community transport organisation operates a contracted service, the resources (both the vehicles and the drivers) are available for community use outside of the core operating hours. So, for example, the small single occupancy vehicles that may be used for special educational needs transport, could also be used to provide accessible door-to-door transport as part of an integrated Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) service.

4) *Attracting extra resources* - community transport organisations are in the advantageous position of being able to lever in extra resources, such as charitable funding, private sponsorship and community support, which is not available through fragmented tendering or the private market. For example, some schemes have been able to access New Deal funding by providing employment placements for drivers and passenger assistants.

Within the context of social exclusion there are clearly benefits to be gained from community transport, which extend beyond increasing people's access to transport. The concept of a bus operator with social aims and community accountability, and one that re-invests its profit for the benefit of local people, brings great benefit for all. In the first instance, there are the individual benefits, including the promotion of independent living, and active and fulfilled lifestyles. At the same time there are benefits for the wider community, community bus operators can create local jobs and employ people from disadvantaged communities, boost local economies, and deliver efficient services that engage excluded social groups. Thus, assisting with community development and promoting social cohesion as well as aiding the process of social and economic regeneration[9].

A sustainable future for community transport

If the community transport sector is to continue on its current growth path, and to increase its impact on tackling the causes and effects of transport on social exclusion, there needs to be a more sustainable level of support. Continuing to deliver the current level of services, expanding capacity, and being responsive to ever changing and evolving local needs, requires community transport organisations to be able to plan ahead. However, greater consideration needs to be given to the issue of the funding regime for the sector, expanding capacity and the question of mainstreaming service provision.

Long-term funding of the community transport sector is the most fundamental issue that needs to be addressed. Across the whole of the sector the main source of income for individual schemes is short-term grant funding. The scale of reliance on these funding pots, reflects the importance of grant funding to individual organisations. Without this funding many projects would cease operating. Due to the limited lifetime of these funding pots, schemes are prevented from long term strategic planning, and are forced to expend significant resources on continually identifying and bidding for new sources of funding. Thus, diverting attention away from the core functions of service delivery. The view of the Community Transport Association's Executive Director, Jenny Meadows, is that

"*Long-term sustainable funding for community transport services has long been a problem even when projects have won unqualified praise for the quality and importance of the services they provide. However, in recent years this problem appears to have been getting worse. A lot of money has gone into community transport from national government in recent years…[but] to an extent [this] masks the underlying problem, which is the financial uncertainty facing community transport projects in the long term.*"[10]

While the increased level of investment from government should be welcomed, there has to be greater efforts to begin moving towards sustainable funding. There are two specific options available to the sector if it is reduce the level of dependency on special initiatives and short term funding pots. Firstly, organisations should aim to diversify their income sources, in other words increase the number of different sources through which income is generated, thereby reducing the potential impact if one source of income is cut off. Practical examples of increasing income from alternative sources includes community transport organisations becoming a registered charity that will open up access to further financial resources. Additionally, schemes could consider introducing or increasing charges for their services, where appropriate, as another way to generate income.

Secondly, enormous potential exists for community transport organisations to secure increased income levels and strengthen sustainability by being enabled to

compete for mainstream service contracts. At present only a limited number of community transport organisations hold mainstream service provision contracts. Many other organisations are held back from tendering for these types of contracts because of the catch-22 position in which they find themselves. The major dilemma facing most operators is how to raise their capacity, as presently demand for community transport outstrips supply in the UK. Approximately 12% (7 million people) of the UK population have mobility problems. If just 2 million people in urban areas were to use Dial-a-ride services once a week it would require a ten-fold increase in the capacity of the sector[11].

To be successful in obtaining mainstream contracts, community transport operators need additional funding in order to raise their capacity in terms of staff and vehicles. However, without the initial funding investment, organisations are unable to increase their capacity and, therefore, are prevented from bidding for the mainstream contracts. There is no question that for many community transport organisations, mainstream contracts could be a significant step towards achieving sustainability.

In Greater Manchester, a partnership between the Community Transport Association and the Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Association (GMPTA) is laying the foundations for community transport organisations being equipped to access mainstream opportunities in the future. The 'Greater Manchester Communities on the Move'[12] project is a two-year action research project, which aims to gain a better understanding of the community transport sector through an in-depth assessment of capacity and development needs within the Greater Manchester area.

Beyond this assessment, GMPTA are supporting the development of agreed professional standards in legal constitution, professional competence and training for participating community transport organisations, and have delivered training and support for those who have required it. By developing the capacity of the individual organisations and the sector as a whole, community transport organisations will be in a position to apply for funding from the new Greater Manchester Community Transport Trust.

Conclusion

Community transport clearly has a role to play in tackling the transport-related social exclusion issues facing many sections of the population. Clearly, the community transport sector can bring added-value over and above current provision and there is untapped potential to be fulfilled. A more prominent role for the sector is desirable, however, that role should not be of a stop-gap to plug the gaps left by the traditional mainstream transport operators. For the sector to develop greater support needs to be given in terms of financial resources as well as training and a building of capacity. It is imperative however, as the community transport sector grows and develops that it retains its ability to challenge received thinking and innovate through continued identification of community needs and appropriate service responses.

1) www.communitytransport.com
2) The Community Transport Association is the national representative body of the voluntary sector transport operators covering the whole of the UK. The CTA is committed to supporting its members through direct support, such as training and development but also by lobbying on behalf of the movement.
3) Assume this refers to the CTA's forthcoming funders guide?
4) 'Once Upon a Time in the West Midlands' Community Transport Magazine March/April 2004 pp19-21
5) Community Transport Association (June 2001) - Streetwise Action: An Action Plan to develop the new transport services needed in urban communities across the UK: Draft for Consultation
6) Social Exclusion Unit (2003) - Making Connections: A final report on transport and social exclusion
7) Survey conducted by Leonard Cheshire (2003) Mind the Gap reported on in Community Transport Magazine Nov/Dec 2003 p11
8) Community Transport Association (June 2001) - Streetwise Action: An Action Plan to develop the new transport services needed in urban communities across the UK: Draft for Consultation
9) Community Transport Magazine Apr/May 2003 P27
10) Community Transport Magazine Sept/Oct 2004 p11
11) Community Transport Association (June 2001) - Streetwise Action: An Action Plan to develop the new transport services needed in urban communities across the UK: Draft for Consultation
12) Anthony Travis (2003) - Greater Manchester Communities on the Move: A guide to Community Transport in Greater Manchester (downloaded from www.communitytransport.com)

CLES Centre for Local Economic Strategies

For details of previous issues of Local Work or to subscribe to CLES products and services visit

www.cles.org.uk