

Driving Change:

Shaping the Future of
Community Transport
in Northern Ireland



Credit- Armagh Rural Transport



Delivered by

**THE NATIONAL LOTTERY
COMMUNITY FUND**

cta
community transport
association

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Introduction

Over the years the Community Transport Association (CTA) has built strong and meaningful relationships with its primary members, supported by funding from the Rural Transport Fund.

In 2023, the Community Transport sector endured an exceptionally challenging year. With budget cuts looming, many vital services were at risk, creating significant uncertainty for the people and communities who rely on them. What followed was an extraordinary show of solidarity, as passengers, organisations, and political representatives came together to highlight the essential role Community Transport plays in keeping people connected. This collective effort was particularly successful in influencing decision-makers to prevent immediate funding cuts. Despite this achievement, the sector continues to feel the lasting effects of this turbulent period.

This report comes at a critical time, as both the Community Transport Association and the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) have undertaken research and reviews of Community Transport in Northern Ireland. As we began our NI research mapping the sector, it became clear that the voices and experiences of primary members were essential to telling their story – what it is truly like on the ground. This led to the creation of this report, which focuses specifically on primary members. These are the individuals who work tirelessly each day to deliver services that make a genuine difference to people’s lives, all while navigating significant operational and financial challenges.

The research was made possible thanks to funding received through Dormant Assets NI. Special thanks were extended to The National Lottery Community Fund who deliver this programme, for their continued backing and engagement throughout the project.

I would also like to say a massive thank you to the primary members who contributed their time and expertise to this report. It has been extremely rewarding to work with them over the past few months, and their contributions have been invaluable in shaping this report. Every day, they lead with compassion, ensuring that no one feels isolated or overlooked.

This report brings together a significant amount of data, stories, and insights into a single comprehensive document, clearly demonstrating the remarkable value of Community Transport to the lives of so many people. It highlights the profound difference these services make for passengers while also addressing the serious challenges the sector continues to face.

At its core this report is about people: those who depend on these services and those who make them possible. It is a call to action for collaboration and solutions, to address the obstacles ahead, and ensure Community Transport remains resilient and thriving for years to come.

Investing in Community Transport is ultimately an investment in people, their connections, and the communities they belong to.

Frances Campbell
Director for Northern Ireland

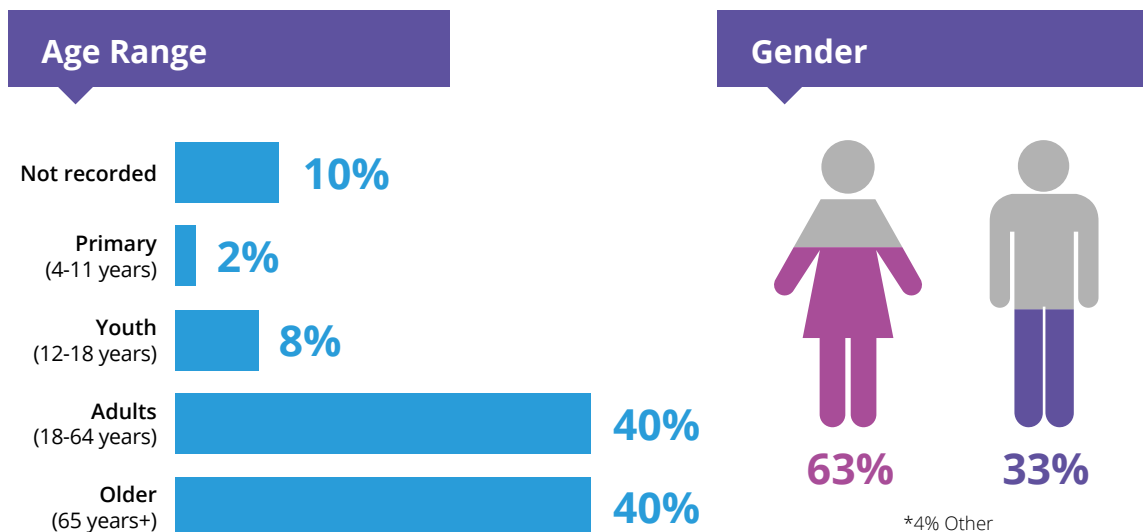


Method



Community Transport trips in Northern Ireland in 2023/24

Community Transport Trip Data 2023/24



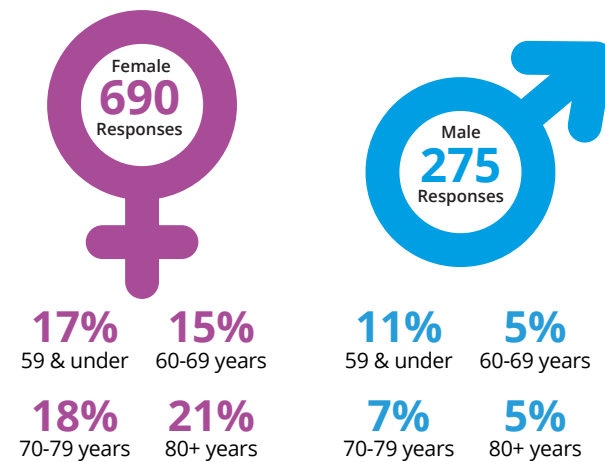
* Community Transport Manager Reporting Data 2023/24, collated per each organisation
 1 Total Trips includes: DATS (78,139), Dial a Lift (181,806), Group hire (60,998), Other (5,310).
 2 Total Mileage includes Live (3,673,897) and Dead (1,460,660) miles excluding DATS Service.

Passenger survey key findings*

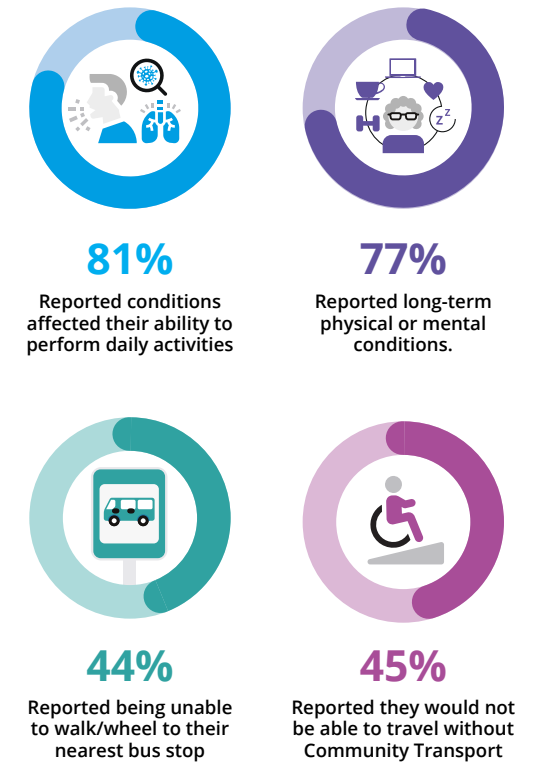
1010
survey responses

The following information highlights passengers' perspectives and insights on their experiences using Community Transport across various key areas.

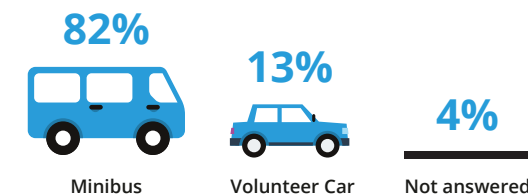
Age and gender



Health and mobility



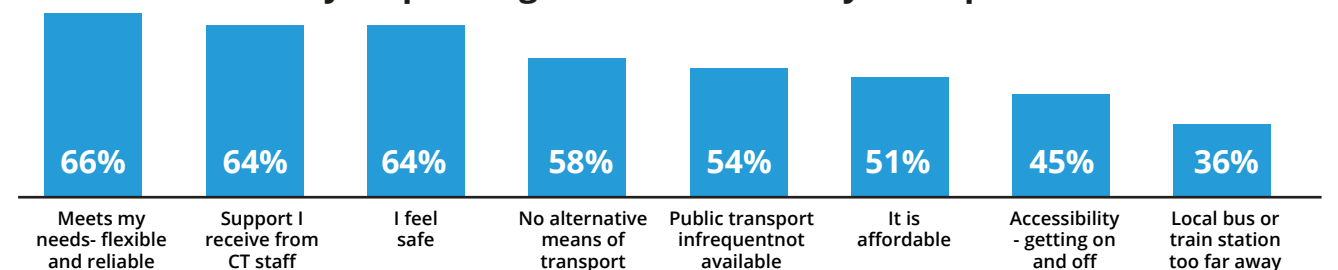
Type of vehicle



How often passengers use Community Transport?



Why do passengers use Community Transport?



* 29% Unable to use public transport (29%)
 * Data taken from DfI Passenger survey, collated as part of Community Transport Review. This includes 1,010 responses collected across all organisations.

Passenger survey key findings*

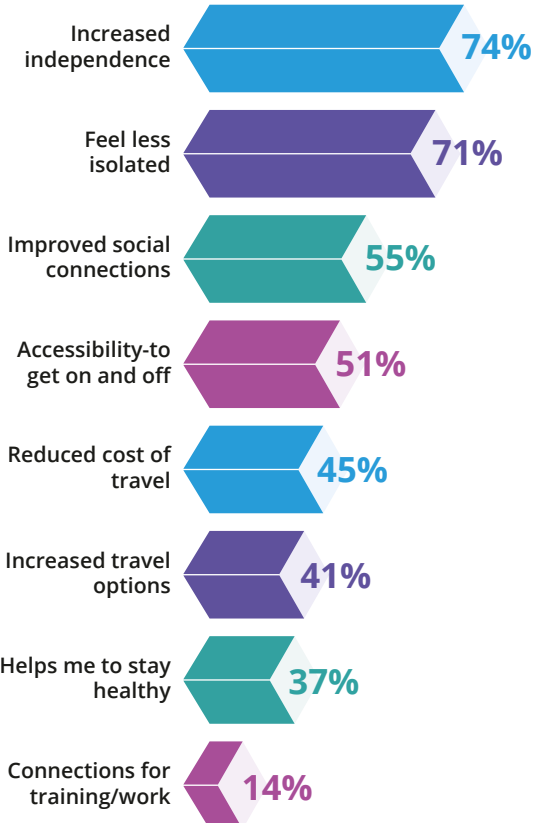
1010
survey responses

Reasons for using Community Transport



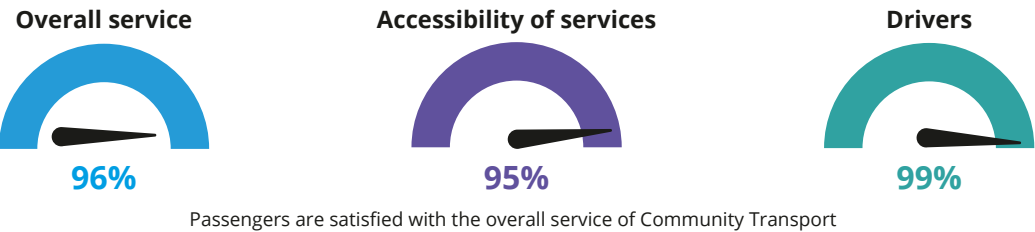
*Religious Events (8%), Volunteering (6%), Other (6%)

Benefits and impact



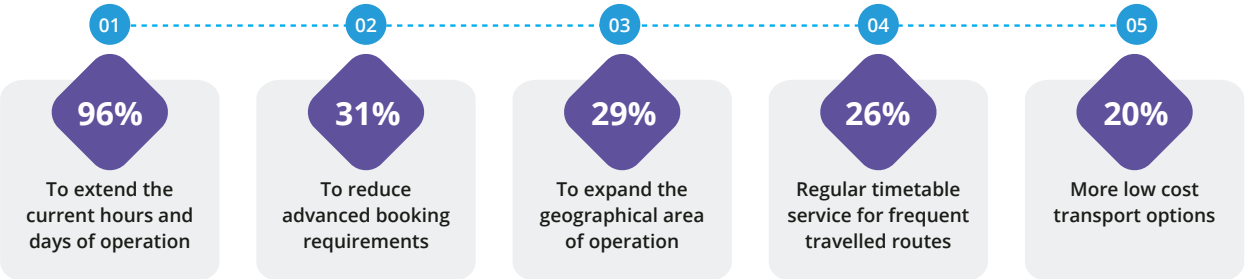
*Other (1%)

Passenger satisfaction ratings



Passengers are satisfied with the overall service of Community Transport

Passengers' Suggested Areas for Improvement



• 1010 Responses collected through DfI Passenger survey

Passenger Survey

The Department for Infrastructure (DfI) Passenger Survey, as part of the Community Transport Review, gathered insights from 1,010 Community Transport passengers, providing a comprehensive understanding of passenger demographics, health conditions, and transportation needs. Responses revealed that 68% of respondents were female, while 27% were male, and 5% chose not to disclose their gender, suggesting a higher reliance on Community Transport among women. In terms of age, 28% of respondents were aged 59 or younger, while 25% were between 70-79 years old, and 25% were 80 years or older. This broad age range emphasises the importance of Community Transport for a diverse demographic and is particularly relevant given the age qualification of 80 and over for the Disability Action Transport Scheme (DATS).

Minibuses were the primary mode of transport for 82% of journeys, while volunteer cars were used for 13%. The preference for minibuses highlights their importance in the Community Transport sector, likely due to their capacity to carry more passengers and meet accessibility requirements.

Passengers were also asked if they had any long-term physical or mental health conditions. Of the 77% who reported such conditions, the highest incidence was among those aged 59 and under (24%), followed by 20% in the 80+ group and 18% in the 70-79 age group. Moreover, 81% of those with health conditions reported that these affected their daily activities, emphasising the complex needs of Community Transport passengers and members. The data also highlights a potential need to address demographic trends, support active ageing, and ensure that individuals remain engaged and connected to foster independence and well-being. Community Transport plays a vital role for individuals with disabilities and health conditions, offering essential support for maintaining independence. This is particularly crucial in areas facing challenges such as limited public transport, accessibility barriers, and financial constraints. It bridges these gaps, ensuring vulnerable individuals can access necessary services and opportunities.

Accessibility was a key issue. When asked how long it would take to walk or wheel to the nearest bus or train station, 45% reported being unable to make this journey. This figure increased to 57% among those with severely limiting health conditions. Only 11% could reach their nearest station in 10 minutes or less, further emphasising the need for accessible, door-to-door Community Transport services.

For 44% of passengers, Community Transport is indispensable, as they would be unable to travel without it. This highlights the service's crucial role in maintaining mobility and connection. Additionally, 32% would have to rely on family or friends if the service were unavailable, while 31% would turn to taxis, often incurring significant financial costs. Only 12% of passengers reported access to a household car, in terms of car access this contrasts with Northern Ireland Census data showing that only 13% of households do not have access to car or van. Public transport was considered a viable alternative by just 7% of respondents, highlighting its limited availability or adequacy in certain regions. This low reliance on public transport likely reflects service reductions or inadequacies in rural or underserved areas, further reinforcing the vital role of Community Transport in ensuring access to essential services and enabling social participation. These findings clearly demonstrate the significant dependence on Community Transport among those who currently use it.

¹ Northern Ireland Census 2021: Households in Northern Ireland by car or van availability. https://build.nisra.gov.uk/en/custom/data?d=HOUSEHOLD&v=HH_CAR_VAN_TC5

Taking passengers where and when they need to go, flexibility and reliability emerged as the top reasons for using Community Transport, cited by 66% of passengers. This was closely followed by the support provided by staff and the sense of safety, each noted by 64%. These findings highlight the importance of a person-centred approach, particularly given the high prevalence of physical and mental health conditions among users. Additionally, 58% of passengers reported having no alternative transport options, while 54% highlighted inadequate public transport services as a significant factor. Moreover, 45% faced challenges with public transport accessibility. Affordability was a major consideration for 51% of users, underscoring the critical role Community Transport plays in easing financial pressures during times of rising living costs and inflation, while ensuring accessibility for vulnerable groups.

Shopping, social events, and hospital appointments emerged as the most common reasons for using Community Transport, with 55% of passengers citing these needs. Additionally, 53% relied on the service to access local health services, underscoring its vital role in facilitating access to essential health and social care. Leisure activities, such as visiting the hairdresser or cinema, were also significant, mentioned by 27% of passengers, while 23% highlighted the importance of accessing community and voluntary groups. Day opportunities, encompassing employment, education or training, and social farming programmes, accounted for 20% of usage. Connections to work, training, and religious events each represented 9% of use, and 8% of passengers relied on the service for education and training through local and regional colleges. These insights demonstrate the indispensable role Community Transport plays in meeting diverse needs from healthcare to social and educational opportunities, each empowering individuals, fostering independence, and enhancing well-being.

The benefits of Community Transport were strongly emphasised by passengers, with 74% identifying increased independence as the primary advantage, followed by reduced isolation (71%) and improved social connections (55%). Additionally, 51% appreciated the accessibility of the service, 45% highlighted reduced travel costs, and 41% valued the expanded travel options. Furthermore, 37% noted that Community Transport supports their health, while 14% recognised its role in connecting them to training and employment opportunities.

Passenger satisfaction with Community Transport services was exceptionally high, with drivers achieving a 99% satisfaction rate. Overall, 96% of respondents expressed satisfaction with the service, while key aspects such as accessibility, fare costs, reliability, and support from office staff were rated at 95%.

Passengers also identified several priorities for service improvements and future changes. A combined 72% of users requested extensions to current operating hours (39%) and days of operation (33%), demonstrating a strong demand for greater availability. Additionally, 31% expressed a desire to reduce advanced booking requirements. However, as booking policies vary widely among providers, any changes would need to carefully balance operational efficiency with existing financial limitations.

Overall, the results highlight the critical role Community Transport plays in providing accessible, reliable, and person-centred services. For individuals facing mobility challenges, it is a lifeline, emphasising the need for continued support and investment.



Credit: Out and About Community Transport



Credit: South Antrim Community Transport

Organisations using Community Transport to enable access to services

99
Survey Responses *

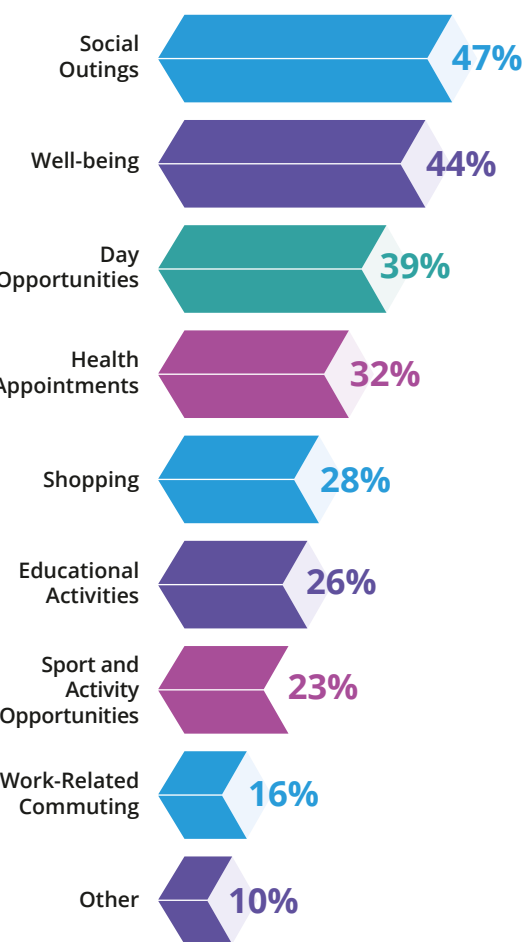
This survey gathered insights from organisations whose members rely on Community Transport to access essential services and activities. It examined how Community Transport supports member engagement, evaluated its impact on organisational operations, and identified areas for improvement.

How organisations were supported by Community Transport



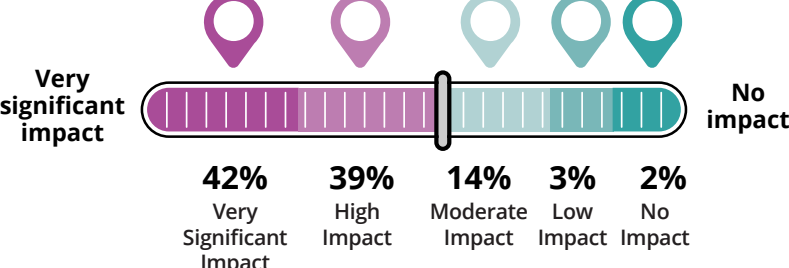
Connecting activity

Types of services and activities that Community Transport provides access to.



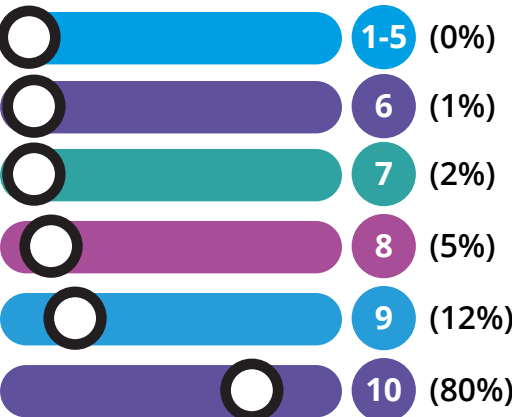
Organisational impact

How the absence of Community Transport would impact organisational activity.



Organisational importance

Importance of access to Community Transport for members access to services on a scale 1-10



Organisations Using Community Transport to Access Services

99
survey responses

Use and Engagement

Impact the absence of Community Transport on your organisation's programmes and services



Direct example from organisations

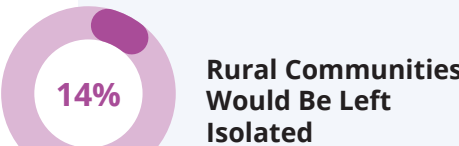
"A lot of our clients wouldn't be able to access our services or programmes without Community Transport. This would impact upon our attendance numbers they would drop dramatically. Our clients wouldn't benefit from access to free support within their communities. Our services enable our clients to access our programmes, meet others who experience health care issues like themselves." [Northern Ireland Chest Heart & Stroke](#)



"We support older people to attend different appointments and wellbeing groups. If this was not an option, there would be a large number of people who would miss appointments, increase pressure on the ambulance service, and who wouldn't consider going to these support group opportunities which boost their mental health." [Volunteer Now](#)



"Our service users are Blind and or partially sighted and Community Transport services are a vital link to our services to ensure our community can get out and about to various activities. Our community can be deeply impacted by loneliness and social isolation and these services are so vital for wellbeing and access." [Royal National Institute of Blind People \(RNIB\)](#)



"Majority of our service users who use Community Transport are wheelchairs users. There is limited wheelchair taxi's and sometimes none available so we rely so much on Community Transport." [Mencap](#)



"They would either be unable to go out or be out a substantial amount of money on taxis. A lot of our clients can't use public transport as they don't have the ability to walk too far. Community transport provide door to door service." [Rose NI Ltd](#)



"Rural communities wouldn't be able to attend different doctor, hospital appointments, shopping, other events being held throughout rural areas." [Brighter Ballymagorry Development Group](#)

Survey findings show that 94% of organisations rely on Community Transport to access essential local services, highlighting its vital role in supporting community and voluntary organisations. By bridging accessibility gaps and fostering collaboration, it enhances social cohesion, resilience, and community well-being.

Community Transport addresses isolation and fosters inclusion by facilitating social outings (47%), wellbeing programmes (44%), and day opportunities (39%). It ensures access to health appointments (32%), supports independence through shopping assistance (28%), and empowers members with education (26%) and sports opportunities (23%). Additionally, it connects 16% of passengers to employment opportunities or public transport. Its impact extends to specialised needs, such as mobility scooters, family visits, and dementia support, promoting inclusion and independence for individuals with disabilities. Community Transport plays an important role in strengthening local communities by enhancing health, promoting independence, and improving the quality of life for diverse populations.

The survey also emphasises the crucial role of Community Transport in enabling members of local organisations to fully participate in valuable activities and services within their communities. Notably, 80% of respondents rated these services as 10 in importance, with an additional 12% rating them as 9. These results clearly demonstrate how essential Community Transport is in supporting member participation in activities and programmes, reinforcing its indispensable role in meeting community needs.

Organisations that rely on Community Transport to enable access for their members noted that the absence of these services would severely impact their ability to deliver effective programmes and services. The feedback received was largely categorised into five key areas:

1. Sharp decline in programme participation and service availability

Community Transport is essential for accessing services and programmes offered by community and voluntary organisations, health groups, and community centres. Its absence would cause a sharp decline in participation rates, with some organisations estimating attendance could drop by as much as 80%. This steep reduction would threaten the sustainability of many programmes, potentially forcing organisations to scale back or even discontinue operations. Programmes like lunch clubs, educational classes, and social support services which are reliant on steady participation for funding would be particularly impacted. If access to crucial support was removed, many users would lose valuable resources for health, well-being, and social connection, creating a cycle where limited transport leads to declining demand and, ultimately, undermines service provision.

2. Escalating social isolation and loneliness

Organisations report that removing Community Transport services would greatly increase social isolation, particularly for older, disabled, and vulnerable individuals. In many rural or underserved areas, these services are the only means to access social gatherings, support groups, and community activities. The essential link between Community Transport and members' access to social connections and peer support was consistently highlighted. Without these services, individuals would largely be confined to their homes, facing isolation that harms their well-being. Organisations expressed concerns that this loss would significantly increase members' risk of mental health issues, reduced mobility, and declining physical health. This is especially troubling for those with conditions like dementia, where regular social interaction is crucial for effective care.

3. Disproportionate impact on rural and isolated communities

The loss of Community Transport would have a significant impact on rural and isolated areas, where public transport options are often limited or non-existent. Many rural residents rely on Community Transport to access essential services such as healthcare, education, and grocery shopping. Without these services, individuals would experience heightened isolation. This would particularly affect older and disabled adults, as well as low-income families, many of whom cannot afford private taxis or lack personal vehicles. The absence of alternative transport would further exacerbate social isolation, limit educational opportunities for children in rural schools, and reduce participation in community activities. Additionally, the loss of Community Transport would widen the inequality gap between urban and rural populations, intensifying the challenges faced by already isolated regions.

4. Increased financial burden and environmental costs

The absence of Community Transport would pose significant financial and logistical challenges for both passengers and organisations. Many individuals would be forced to rely on more expensive private hire options, while some might forgo essential services altogether due to prohibitive costs. The expense of private taxis, particularly in areas with limited public transport, would be unaffordable for many. Organisations would also face increased financial burdens in arranging alternative transport for their clients. Community Transport helps reduce the need for multiple individual journeys, minimising carbon emissions and the overall environmental footprint of rural communities. An increased reliance on private vehicles or taxis would negate these benefits, leading to higher carbon emissions and decreased sustainability.

5. Severe disruption to healthcare access

For countless Community Transport users, access to medical appointments, treatments, and healthcare programmes is essential. Losing this service would create significant barriers to healthcare access, especially for those with mobility challenges or those in remote areas with limited public transport. Organisations noted that many individuals would miss critical healthcare appointments without Community Transport, resulting in worsening health outcomes. Responses also highlighted that this gap could increase pressure on ambulance services, as some may delay seeking medical attention until emergencies arise. Such disruptions directly impact those reliant on regular healthcare visits to manage chronic conditions or attend mental health support groups, ultimately diminishing quality of life and adding strain to health services.

This evidence underscores the significant value of Community Transport in strengthening local communities and organisations. While the focus has primarily been on the potential consequences of losing and/or reducing CT services, it is evident that these services play a crucial role in ensuring access to vital activities and services. The ongoing cost of living and financial challenges facing the community and voluntary sectors further highlight the critical role of Community Transport, while also highlighting how transport is increasingly becoming a barrier to expanding and enhancing services. Recognising the strong synergy between Community Transport and the community and voluntary sector, it is evident that greater investment in these services could empower communities and organisations to thrive. Expanding the reach and capacity of Community Transport would not only maintain current participation but also unlock untapped potential, fostering greater social inclusion, mobility, and opportunities across Northern Ireland.



Credit: North Coast Community Transport



Credit: Fermanagh Community Transport

Lagan Valley Rural Transport (LVRT) is an invaluable service that greatly impacts our day opportunities programme. Without it, some participants would be unable to attend, leaving them at risk of social isolation. Recently, LVRT began offering door-to-door transport for our groups, allowing us to go out without concerns about accessibility, as all their buses are wheelchair-friendly.

- Orchardville, Lisburn

Credit: Lagan Valley Rural Transport

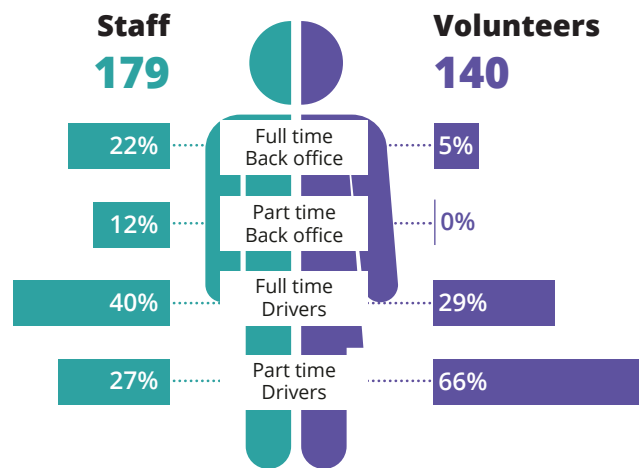


Credit: Lagan Valley Rural Transport

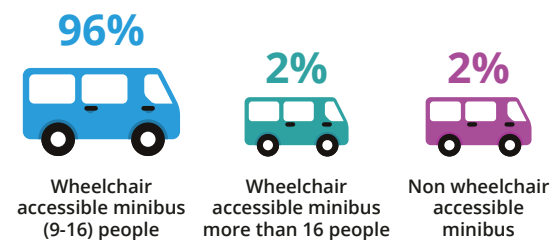
Lagan Valley Rural Transport (LVRT) is invaluable to those who use our services at the **Cedar Foundation Inclusion Matters Service** in Lisburn. When new people come onto our programme the first thing we do is sign them up for the LVRT service. Once signed up we know our users can get out and about to all of their social activities that we arrange for them. For the people who use our services, they feel safe and comfortable in the buses and enjoy the craic with the bus drivers. Thank you LVRT for helping us achieve our goals.

Cedar Foundation Lisburn

Who works in Community Transport?



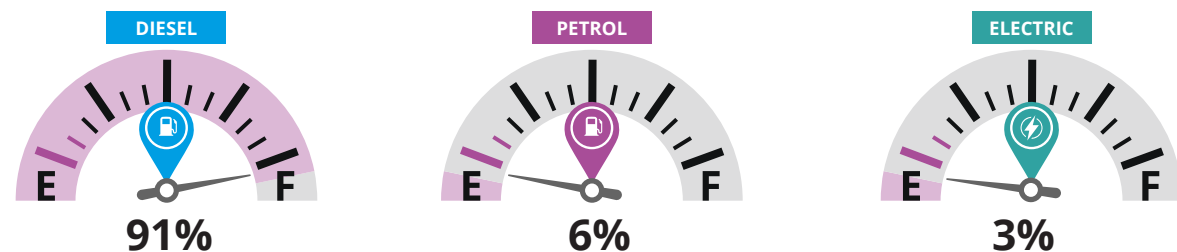
Type of vehicle



Staff and Volunteers



Vehicle Fuel Type



69% of organisations plan to buy a new vehicle within 2 years

85% Use savings, reserves, and grants to fund new vehicle purchases.

46% agree climate change is a key organisational objective.

15% of organisations have a net zero plan or strategy.

* There are 13 primary purpose operators across Northern Ireland, providing essential services in both rural and urban areas.

1. Community Transport structure and funding

Context

The Community Transport sector in Northern Ireland plays a vital role in meeting the diverse mobility needs of local communities. Thirteen primary transport providers play a central role within this network, delivering essential services across Northern Ireland. Many of these Community Transport operators have been integral to their communities for over two decades, fostering a deep understanding of local needs and enabling effective service delivery. Community Transport Organisations are divided into two categories: primary purpose operators, which are dedicated exclusively to road passenger transport, and secondary purpose operators, which provide transport as part of wider community support activities. This report focuses on the 13 primary purpose operators, whose services are foundational to the Community Transport network. Of these, 11 are part of the Rural Community Transport Partnerships, while 2 primarily serve urban areas.

Key funding programmes and initiatives, administered by the Department for Infrastructure are critical in addressing transport gaps in regions where public transport is either non-existent or insufficient to meet local mobility needs. This funding stream plays an important role in supporting primary purpose operators to provide vital door-to-door transport to the communities they serve.

The [Rural Transport Fund \(RTF\)](#) was set up in 1998 in recognition of the difficulties rural communities experience in accessing mainstream public transport. The RTF offers both revenue and capital funding to Rural Community Transport Partnerships, enabling them to provide a range of complementary services that enhance the public transport network for their members. Through programmes such as the Dial a Lift scheme, the RTF overcomes transport barriers enabling rural residents to attend work, education, healthcare appointments, and other essential activities. This initiative is key to reducing isolation, promoting independence, and strengthening community cohesion in rural areas.

Similarly, the [Transport Programme for People with Disabilities \(TPPD\)](#), introduced in 1991, addresses the transport accessibility gap for individuals with disabilities who cannot use conventional public transport. Supported by the Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, the TPPD funds services like the Disability Action Transport Scheme (DATS), which provides specialised transport for individuals in both urban and rural areas. By ensuring that people with mobility impairments can access key destinations, the TPPD enhances their quality of life and fosters social inclusion, enabling them to fully participate in society.

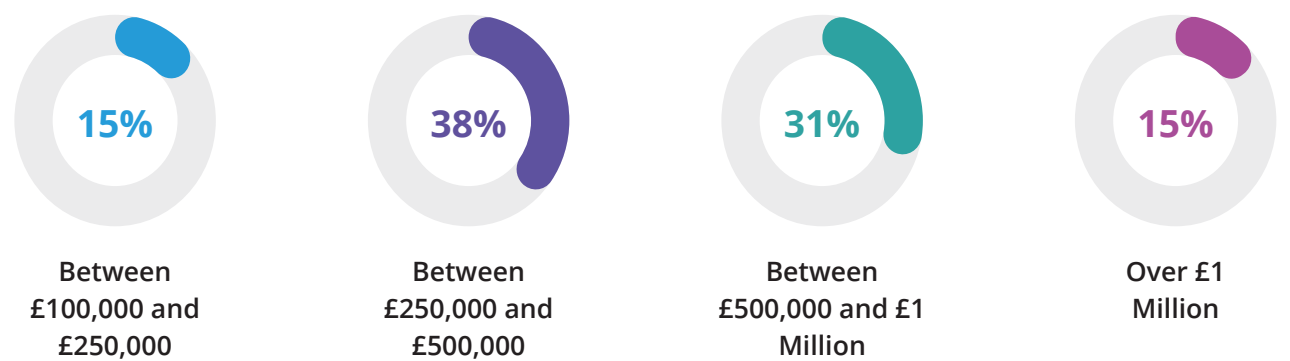
The Assisted Rural Travel Scheme (ARTS) is a discounted travel scheme available to members of Rural Community Transport Partnerships (RCTPs) on Dial-a-Lift services. The Scheme offers travel discounts to Partnership members who hold a valid Smart Pass which are equal to those the individual would be eligible for on mainstream public transport services (Translink). The policy intent of ARTS is to increase the low uptake and usage of Smart Passes in rural areas which lack public transport infrastructure by providing this through the Partnerships. Through this travel concession ARTS aims to contribute positively to tackling rural poverty and social isolation.

² <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/infrastructure/s75-screening%20-assisted-rural-travel-scheme-arts-2023-24-budget-final-19-may-23.pdf>

Together, these funding programmes play an important role in addressing transport inequalities across Northern Ireland. They not only improve mobility but also foster greater social inclusion, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their location or ability, have access to the opportunities they deserve. However, it is important to consider these grant programmes within the context of the ongoing funding challenges faced by primary operators across Northern Ireland. Addressing these challenges is essential to ensuring the sustainability and continued success of these vital transport services.

Organisational income band

Nearly 70% of primary providers have incomes ranging from £250,000 to £1 million, indicating that most operators in this sector operate on a moderate to large scale. In contrast, only 15% of operators fall within the lower income bracket of £100,000 to £250,000, while another 15% exceed £1 million in income. This distribution reveals a clear imbalance, with a significant number of operators concentrated in the mid-range income bracket and fewer at both the lower and higher ends.



Service areas

In Northern Ireland, areas are labelled as urban or rural based on how many people live there and how close they are to key services. Urban areas are towns or cities with 10,000 or more people, or smaller areas that are within a 20-30 minute drive to major services like shops, schools, or hospitals. Rural areas are smaller places with fewer than 5,000 people or those that are farther from urban centres and services.

Almost half (46%) of primary providers primarily serve rural areas, underscoring the crucial need for transport in these regions, where public transportation options are often limited or absent. For residents of these rural communities these services act as lifelines, granting access to essential destinations such as hospitals, health appointments and shops that might otherwise be difficult to reach. Another 38% of operators cater to both rural and urban areas, reflecting the broad reach of Community Transport and the ongoing challenges of mobility across different environments. Even in urban settings, transportation remains a significant issue.³

³ Urban - Rural Classification | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

A smaller portion of 15%, focus exclusively on urban areas. The contrast between operators serving rural areas and those covering both types of communities highlights distinct challenges. Rural-focused operators may encounter higher costs due to longer distances and fewer passengers, while those serving mixed areas must strategically balance resources to meet the diverse needs of both rural and urban populations.

The areas of operation, defined by the Department for Infrastructure (DfI), have been in place for a considerable time. However, due to demographic changes and evolving community needs, these maps require updating. Without revisions, systemic and service inequalities may persist, potentially disadvantaging certain Community Transport users in specific areas.

As part of its ongoing review of Community Transport services, particularly the Dial-A-Lift (DAL) and Disability Action Transport Scheme (DATS) programmes, DfI should prioritise updating operational maps to ensure services align with the current needs of Northern Ireland's changing population.

Sources of funding

The Department for Infrastructure is the main financial contributor for the primary providers, accounting for 77% of the largest source of funds. This funding is critical for the success and continuation of Community Transport services. It is important to note that this has been a long-standing source of funding from the Department for Infrastructure. While the amount of funding has varied, it has consistently remained part of the discretionary budget allocation. Therefore, maintaining strong relationships with the Department for Infrastructure and advocating for Community Transport is crucial. However, this reliance carries significant risks; any reduction in funding would disproportionately affect the availability and quality of transport services in these communities. The Motability Foundation, which contributes 23% of the largest funding source, plays a crucial role in advancing accessible transport, particularly for individuals with disabilities. Partnering with the Motability Foundation is increasingly important to members, as it facilitates growth and drives innovation in addressing diverse transport needs. As demand for accessible and inclusive transportation continues to rise, support from the Motability Foundation enables organisations to expand services, acquire new vehicles, and reach a broader range of users. However, while funding is vital to members, its short-term nature highlights the need for strategic partnerships to ensure long-term sustainability and meaningful impact.

| Largest Source | | | Second Largest | | | Third Largest | | |
|----------------|-------------------------------|-----|----------------|--|-----|---------------|--|-----|
| 01 | DEPARTMENT FOR INFRASTRUCTURE | 77% | 01 | DEPARTMENT FOR INFRASTRUCTURE | 30% | 01 | THE NATIONAL LOTTERY COMMUNITY FUND | 40% |
| 02 | THE MOTABILITY FOUNDATION | 23% | 02 | THE MOTABILITY FOUNDATION | 20% | 02 | THE MOTABILITY FOUNDATION | 20% |
| | | | 03 | THE NATIONAL LOTTERY COMMUNITY FUND | 20% | 03 | OTHER CENTRAL GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS (DAERA) | 20% |
| | | | 04 | OTHER CENTRAL GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS (DAERA) | 20% | 04 | HEALTH & SOCIAL CARE TRUSTS/LOCAL COUNCILS | 10% |
| | | | 05 | HEALTH & SOCIAL CARE TRUSTS/LOCAL COUNCILS | 10% | 03 | LOCAL DISTRICT COUNCILS | 10% |

Additionally, in terms of the second largest source of funding the DfI provides 30% of the funding. Other key sources of funding include the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) at 20%, as well as the Motability Foundation and the National Lottery Community Fund, each contributing 20%. This diverse funding base broadens opportunities for securing additional support, particularly through collaboration with DAERA, especially if transport services align with environmental sustainability goals. Contributions from Local District Councils (10%) further strengthen local projects and initiatives.

At the third-largest funding level, the National Lottery Community Fund contributes 40%, highlighting its critical role in supporting projects beyond primary government funding. These contributions provide essential resources for community-driven initiatives. The Motability Foundation (20%) and other sources of generated income, including fares, account for further 20%. They also play significant roles at this level, with the Motability Foundation emerging as a key funding source across all three tiers of funding income. Local District Councils (10%) and Health and Social Care trust (10%) are closely linked to funding of local projects and initiatives.

Main barriers and challenges

Primary providers agreed that current funding levels are insufficient, creating significant challenges to the sustainability of their services. Without increased funding that aligns with the true costs of delivering these services, providers will be forced to make difficult decisions, ultimately limiting service availability for many individuals. Rising costs, further exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis and inflation, place additional strain on these services, particularly affecting disabled and older individuals who rely heavily on Community Transport. Without adequate funding, reduced service availability could limit access to transportation for many vulnerable individuals. As operational costs continue to rise and budget constraints persist, finding a balance between maintaining service continuity and managing fiscal responsibility is essential to ensuring the long-term sustainability of Community Transport. Service delivery is largely dictated by available budgets rather than the actual needs of the community, forcing primary providers to seek additional funding sources to sustain essential services like Dial-A-Lift. Members and the CTA have consistently raised this issue with senior officials and politicians, advocating for stronger action to secure the future of these vital services. Many charitable funders are reluctant to finance what they consider core services, believing this should be the responsibility of government departments. Instead, they tend to support new pilot projects and innovative initiatives, but often on a short-term basis. This approach is unsustainable, as it fails to provide the stable support needed for core services that local communities across Northern Ireland depend on. Without reliable, long-term funding increases, these vital services are at risk, jeopardising the well-being and independence of vulnerable populations who rely on them.

A major funding issue is that Community Transport is often overlooked within broader transport strategies, planning, and operations, despite clear evidence of its necessity. Community Transport is not actively involved in the development of strategies and plans that directly affect transport provision. This oversight not only overlooks its importance but also restricts access to potential funding opportunities. Transport planning generally does not always holistically address the needs of individuals with disabilities and mobility challenges, leading to inequities in service provision. Furthermore, the lack of cross-departmental collaboration and action in recent years has intensified this issue, neglecting the crucial role Community Transport plays in achieving broader government objectives for example, its role within health. Community Transport must be represented in cross-departmental work, ensuring the voices of its passengers are heard. The sector is committed to actively shaping ongoing reviews and future decisions that affect both the service model and the people it serves. As a result, the lack of recognition within wider transport strategies directly impacts

the availability of funding and limits the ability to expand services for vulnerable populations. However, it is important to note that a cross-departmental working group has been recently established and engaged at both ministerial and departmental levels. This collaboration provides a strong platform for the future inclusion of Community Transport as a key solution in transport planning.

There is a critical lack of funding for capital investments and a shortage of multi-year funding cycles. In the past, Primary members received capital investment from DfI until 2016. However, this funding was discontinued, and no replacement has been provided. Without adequate capital investment, operators face increasing difficulty maintaining and modernising their fleets, which drives up operational costs. Currently, the Motability Foundation is the primary external source of funding for vehicle purchases through project related funding. Relying on such limited sources results in higher maintenance costs and jeopardises the safety and reliability of transport services, putting at risk the mobility and accessibility of communities that depend on them. Urgent long-term investment in new vehicles is needed. Such investment would enable Community Transport operators to operate more efficient, carbon-neutral fleets and ensure these services can meet growing demand, all while contributing to a more sustainable future.

Funding clearly represents the main challenge and is a major focus within Community Transport. Equally, it is important to note that the time and resources required for funding applications also pose a considerable challenge. Securing larger grants can disqualify organisations from applying for smaller, project-specific grants, limiting their access to necessary funding. The short-term nature of available grants creates uncertainty, making long-term planning difficult. Additionally, growing competition for these grants makes it increasingly challenging to secure funding, placing further strain on already limited resources. These challenges cannot be solved in isolation; they require a whole-system approach. Addressing funding issues in Community Transport demands collaboration across sectors and stakeholders to ensure long-term sustainability and an effective, accessible transport network.

| Key Issues | Calls to action |
|--|--|
| <p>Insufficient funding is undermining the sustainability of Community Transport services.</p> | <p>Government departments must increase their investment in Community Transport and explore the introduction of Capital Funding.</p> <p>Need to diversify funding sources to ensure a more resilient and sustainable sector.</p> |
| <p>Short-term funding cycles and persistent budget uncertainty hinder effective long-term planning.</p> | <p>Advocate for multi-year funding commitments with inflation-linked increases to create a stable foundation for Community Transport services.</p> |
| <p>Service delivery is constrained by limited budgets that fail to meet increasing community demand.</p> | <p>Expedite DFI Community Transport review, including revisiting current funding methodology.</p> |
| <p>Current budgets do not account for full cost recovery or depreciation, affecting business sustainability and continuity.</p> | <p>Advocate for future budget allocations that incorporate and enable operators to function on a full cost recovery basis.</p> |

What success would look like



By implementing these calls to action, Community Transport will be recognised as a critical component of transportation systems both at a regional and local level. Increased government investment and diverse funding streams will strengthen the sector’s resilience, enabling it to meet the evolving needs of communities. Ensuring the equality rights of users, particularly those with protected characteristics, will safeguard access for all. Furthermore, the Rural Needs Act will ensure that the transport challenges of rural communities, often overlooked by mainstream services, are addressed in policy development.

Multi-year funding commitments and inflation-adjusted budgets will provide the financial stability needed for operators to consistently deliver reliable, high-quality services. This strategic approach will enhance the sector’s capacity to improve access and mobility, reinforcing its role as a vital enabler of social inclusion and community well-being. Ultimately, these measures will position Community Transport as an indispensable driver of equitable access and social cohesion.



Credit: Bridge Accessible Transport



Credit: Disability Action

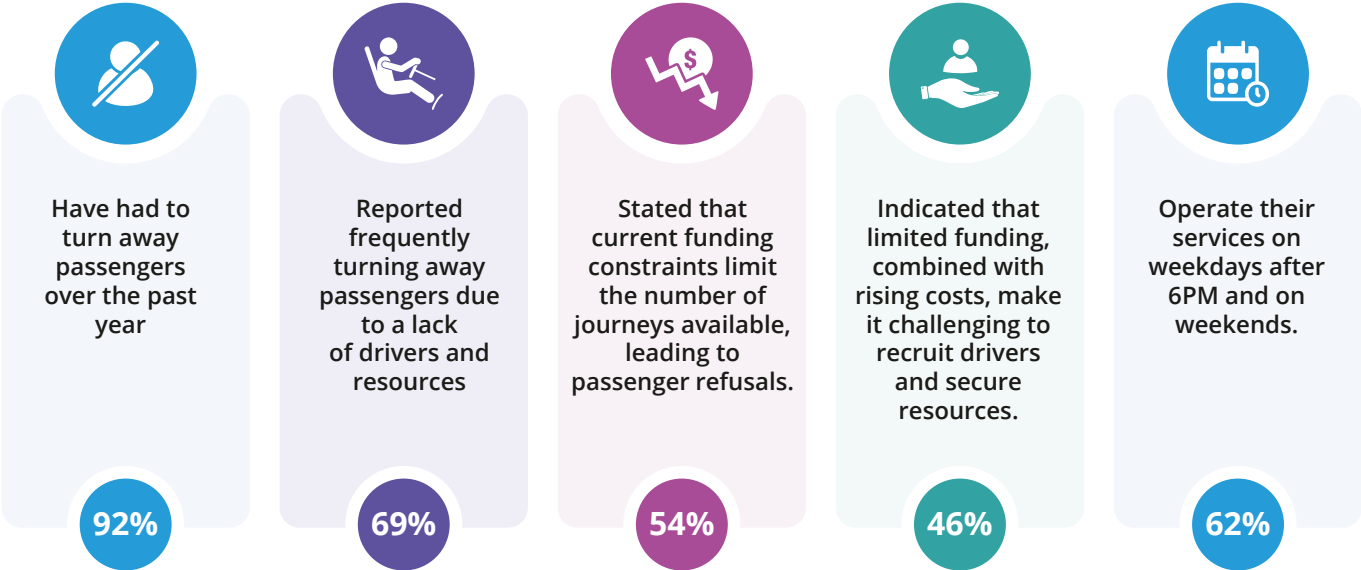
2. Passenger Usage

Community Transport passengers and members

Over the past year, all primary operators reported providing essential transport services for wheelchair users, individuals with visual and hearing impairments, those with mobility challenges, older adults (65+), and individuals with learning disabilities. This commitment to inclusivity supports diverse vulnerable groups, especially those with disabilities and residents in rural areas with limited transportation options. Reliable transport enables these individuals to attend medical appointments, social gatherings, and community events, enhancing their quality of life and fostering independence.

Additionally, 92% of organisations served church and faith groups, rural or isolated residents, and youth groups, strengthening community connections and ensuring access to social and faith-based support. Transport for those facing financial hardships and community groups reliant on these services was provided by 76%, while 69% offered services for children and teenagers, and 61% catered to students and caregivers.

Community Transport addresses the needs of various groups but could expand its impact with additional resources to meet growing demand and better support underserved populations. Enhancing access ensures individuals, regardless of circumstances, can actively participate in society. Community Transport not only facilitates essential services and opportunities for individuals but also supports community and voluntary groups, reinforcing its crucial role in local communities.



Hours of operation

Survey findings indicate that all operators offer services during standard weekday hours, with many extending operations into the evenings primarily for group hires. However, both Community Transport operators and passengers have identified limited operating hours as a significant barrier to accessibility. Recent funding cuts have further curtailed service hours, meaning that outside the 08:00 to 18:00 window, activity taking place outside standard weekday hours typically involves group hires or volunteers. This arrangement does not adequately meet the community's accessibility needs, especially when compared to other public transport options that operate seven days a week.

Current operating hours are constrained by driver contracts and funding from the Department for Infrastructure (DfI), which limits availability for work commutes and early appointments. Additionally, the coverage areas were originally designed for short trips, making it challenging for residents on the outskirts to access these services. To enhance accessibility, it is essential to tackle these funding and operational challenges by expanding service hours and coverage areas, ensuring that the transportation needs of the entire community are effectively met.

Organisational demand

All 13 primary operators report a significant rise in demand for Community Transport services, driven by population growth, increasing community needs, and reduced transport options. This underscores the urgent need to evaluate and expand current services to meet growing demands effectively. However, funding cuts have left services severely under-resourced, with budgets dictating service levels rather than actual community needs. This mismatch has forced many providers to limit trips, leading to increased refusals and unmet needs. Vulnerable groups, including older adults and individuals with disabilities, are disproportionately affected, facing reduced access to essential services.

Service inconsistencies among providers exacerbate disparities, particularly in high-demand areas, increasing the risk of social isolation. Rising operational costs and stagnant funding have kept trip numbers below pre-COVID levels, despite greater focus on health and well-being. Without additional funding, the situation is likely to worsen. An ageing population with complex needs and demographic shifts further highlight the need for strategic planning to enhance Community Transport. Addressing these challenges is crucial to ensure reliable, accessible services that meet both current and future demands.

Passenger refusal rate

The level of community demand for transport services has been consistently highlighted, revealing that current services are not adequately meeting the needs of local residents. Over the past year, this is evidenced by a rise in passenger refusals, with 80% of operators reporting that they had to turn away between 21 and 50 passengers within the previous six months. This clearly indicates that demand is in excess of the available service capacity.

Moreover, these refusals only tell part of the story, many potential passengers are now aware of the trip restrictions specific to their Community Transport organisation and are only booking using a single concessional return journey. Passengers who previously travelled 2 to 3 times a week are

now making fewer trips due to these service restrictions. This decline underscores the urgent need to address capacity and resource challenges to ensure Community Transport can effectively meet the needs of all residents.

The primary reason for passenger refusals is a lack of capacity due to insufficient drivers, with 69% of operators citing staffing shortages as a critical obstacle to meeting demand. Additionally, 46% of operators reported that inadequate funding and rising costs hinder their ability to hire enough drivers and secure essential resources. To effectively tackle these challenges, it is crucial to secure increased funding, optimise resource management, and implement targeted recruitment strategies. By taking these steps, organisations can significantly expand their service capacity and reduce passenger refusals, ensuring that the transportation needs of the community are met and that everyone has access to the services they require.



Key Issues

Community Transport is essential for ensuring individuals can access healthcare and day services, helping to overcome barriers faced by those without other reliable transportation options to access necessary services.

Community Transport serves both health and broader mobility needs and **focusing only on health-related transport risks neglecting other important needs.**

Increased community needs and declining public transport options have driven up demand for Community Transport. However, funding cuts have left services under-resourced, with trip availability still significantly below pre-COVID levels. Budget limitations prevent operators from meeting actual community needs.

Limited service hours outside regular schedules create significant inequalities, particularly for older adults, people with disabilities, and low-income families, who rely on extended availability to access essential services.

Community Transport is experiencing a rise in passengers with complex physical, emotional, and psychological needs. Many require assistance for safe travel, stretching operators' capacity to provide necessary support.

Calls to action

Secure sustainable and adequate funding to ensure Community Transport is recognised and supported for its vital role in providing access to healthcare, social activities, and essential community services.

Develop funding models that balance support for both healthcare and general mobility needs, maintaining independence and social inclusion for users.

The Department for Infrastructure should adopt an equity-based funding approach that prioritises community needs, considering demographics, economic conditions, and geography to ensure fair and effective resource allocation.

Advocate for extended Community Transport service hours to ensure equitable access to essential services, particularly for vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities, older adults, and low-income families.

Allocate resources to support passengers with complex needs, including funding for assistance and group transport, to ensure safe travel and access to health and social care services.

What success would look like



Success in Community Transport will be achieved when it is sustainably funded and recognised for its vital role in connecting individuals to health, social, and community services. Adequate funding ensures services are not only maintained but expanded to meet growing needs, improving access to crucial resources and opportunities for all. A well-structured funding framework will guarantee that both health-related and everyday transport needs are met, empowering individuals with greater independence and social participation.

By aligning funding with the specific needs of local communities, Community Transport can become more responsive and effective, ensuring resources are allocated where they have the greatest impact. Expanding service hours will directly address transportation inequities, especially for vulnerable groups, enabling them to access services they depend on and improving their quality of life. This integrated approach to funding and service delivery will create a more inclusive, equitable transport system that truly benefits everyone.

Amadeu Coimbra⁵, a Portuguese-born individual, moved to Northern Ireland for work. His life took an unexpected turn in 2004 when, at the age of 41, he was seriously injured in a catastrophic car accident.

The accident left Amadeu paralysed from the waist down and caused sight loss in his left eye. Tragically, the crash also claimed the life of the driver. Despite these life-changing circumstances, Amadeu exemplifies resilience and a positive outlook on life. The first year following the accident was particularly difficult for Amadeu as he had to come to terms with his new circumstances. Adapting to life in a wheelchair, learning to live independently, and maintaining a positive mindset were significant challenges.



Credit: Down Armagh Rural Transport (DART)

“Probably the first year was the hardest, your life changes.

It’s totally different but you get used to it.”

Central to Amadeu’s positive outlook is his commitment to staying active and maintaining an active lifestyle. For many years, he has relied on Down Armagh Rural Transport (DART), which has been instrumental in enabling him to engage in various activities. Twice a week, he attends classes at South Lake Leisure Centre, where he participates in sports such as boccia and his favourite—archery.

“I absolutely love it. It’s a great way to socialise, meet new people, and form meaningful friendships,” Amadeu shares. “In the beginning, I had carers to help me at home, but now I’ve reached a point where I can look after myself.”

Having access to DART’s wheelchair-accessible transport has been a lifeline for Amadeu, enabling him to lead as full a life as possible. As well as social and sporting activities, the service also means he can attend his all-important hospital appointments.

“The DART service is excellent. I give it five stars,” Amadeu smiles.

⁵Down Armagh Rural Transport (DART) Blog: <https://www.dartpartnership.co.uk/post/meet-amadeu>

3. Vehicles

Ownership and leasing

Ninety-two percent of primary operators own their vehicles, reflecting a strong commitment to long-term stability and the cost advantages of fleet ownership. By owning their vehicles, these organisations eliminate recurring lease payments and maintain full control over maintenance schedules, ensuring consistent and reliable service. However, this approach presents sustainability challenges, particularly when considering fleet decarbonisation. The focus on purchase price often overshadows the total cost of ownership, which includes ongoing expenses such as fuel, maintenance, and taxes. This can limit the ability to invest in more sustainable, cost-effective options in the longer term.

Additionally, 19% of these organisations use both ownership and leasing strategies, allowing for flexible fleet management that meets varying demands while benefiting from newer leased models. This dual approach balances reliability with adaptability. In contrast, only 6% of organisations exclusively lease vehicles, indicating a prevailing preference within the industry for ownership or a combination of ownership and leasing. This trend underscores how the preference for outright purchases is driven by uncertainty around funding. Long-term funding would enable a more strategic approach, considering the total cost of ownership and the environmental impact.

Vehicle type

Among the 13 primary Community Transport operators, a total of 162 vehicles are owned or leased, with 156 of them being wheelchair-accessible minibuses, which constitutes an impressive 96% of the fleet. This statistic highlights a strong commitment to inclusivity and the specific needs of individuals with mobility impairments. By equipping nearly their entire fleet with accessible minibuses, these operators ensure that all community members, particularly those with disabilities, can access essential services.

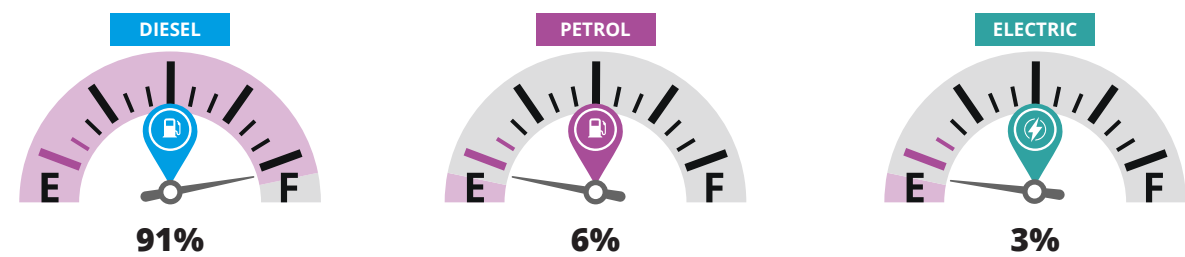
In addition, the fleet includes four wheelchair-accessible buses capable of carrying more than 16 passengers, reflecting the need for suitable transportation options for larger groups. This provision ensures that individuals with disabilities have access to appropriately sized vehicles. In contrast, only one non-accessible bus that accommodates over 16 people and one non-accessible minibus (9-16 people) are included in the fleet. This minimal presence of non-accessible vehicles underscores the clear priority placed on accessibility throughout the entire fleet.

Fuel type

A significant majority of vehicles, 91%, operate on diesel, highlighting a strong reliance on this fuel among primary operators. Diesel's efficiency and durability make it particularly well-suited for high-mileage and heavy-duty use. However, this dependence raises important environmental concerns. Particularly in urban or high density sub-urban areas where air quality is a concern. Only 6% of the vehicles utilise petrol, suggesting that it is not the preferred choice for most Community Transport operators due to its lower fuel efficiency and incompatibility with larger, high-capacity vehicles. The remaining 3% of the fleet consists of all-electric vehicles.

There is broad consensus among primary providers that the current capabilities of electric vehicle (EV) technology are limited to specific routes and usage scenarios. This highlights that the integration of electric vehicles is still in its early stages. Concerns around mileage range are particularly significant in rural areas, where distances between stops can be considerable. Furthermore, challenges such as higher upfront costs, ongoing maintenance, and the lack of a comprehensive charging infrastructure must be addressed before a full transition to electric vehicles becomes feasible.

Fuel types used by Community Transport Operators



Given the current reliance on diesel, Community Transport operators should consider collaborating with government and industry partners to explore alternative fuel options such as hybrid or biofuel technologies, which can offer similar efficiency for high-mileage and heavy-duty applications. CTA acknowledges that Community Transport operators should explore collaboration with the government, and we are committed to supporting the successful delivery of these collaborative efforts. This would help reduce environmental impact while maintaining operational effectiveness. However, it is important to note that the supply chain for alternative fuels presents its own challenges, potentially prolonging the reliance on combustion technologies.

Equally, hydrogen fuel cell technology, though not yet in use in Community Transport, offers a promising zero-emission solution. Hydrogen fuel cell buses have the potential to reduce emissions in transportation, particularly for routes that require longer distances or heavier service. While there are currently no hydrogen vehicles in the Community Transport sector, as the technology and infrastructure develop, hydrogen could become a key part of decarbonising the sector, much like electric vehicles are beginning to do. Translink, for example, is already exploring hydrogen buses as part of its broader transition to zero-emission transport, with plans to incorporate around 20 hydrogen vehicles into its fleet.

Transportation types provided

The range of transportation services offered by Community Transport operators highlights their focus on inclusivity and flexibility:

- 1. Accessibility:** With 92% of organisations providing Dial-a-Lift and Door-to-Door services, there is a strong emphasis on personalized transportation, crucial in rural areas where public options are limited.
- 2. Group Hire:** The availability of Group hire, both with (92%) and without drivers (77%), supports group travel for events, offering convenience and flexibility.
- 3. Specialised Support:** The 85% offering the Disability Action Transport Scheme (DATS) demonstrate a commitment to providing tailored transport solutions for individuals with disabilities in provincial towns.
- 4. Volunteer Involvement:** The 77% with a Volunteer Car Scheme underline the important role of volunteers in extending transport services to those in need.
- 5. Custom Solutions:** The 46% providing additional Door-to-Door transport show a focus on meeting specific community needs with tailored solutions.
- 6. Long-Distance Travel:** The 15% offering the Motability Foundation funded out of area services, run by Easilink cater to those needing transport beyond their immediate area and consultant led appointments.
- 7. Mobility Support:** The 8% offering Mobility Scooter and Wheelchair Services address the needs of individuals with mobility challenges.
- 8. Personal Assistance:** The 8% of Volunteers providing Medication/Prescription/Shopping Collection ensure support for those unable to run errands due to health or mobility issues.

Vehicle Life Span

Regarding vehicle acquisition, 64% of organisations have purchased or leased a new vehicle within the past year. This significant percentage demonstrates a strong commitment to modernising their fleets and making recent investments to ensure efficient and reliable services. In contrast, 9% of organisations have acquired new vehicles within the last three years, indicating a less frequent update cycle. Additionally, 27% of organisations last updated their vehicles more than three years ago, which raises concerns about potential efficiency and safety issues within ageing fleets. As part of regulatory requirements, regular service and maintenance procedures are conducted to ensure the continued high quality and effectiveness of Community Transport services.

Delivery wait times for recent vehicle purchases or leases

A significant portion of organisations (38%) received their most recent vehicle delivery within 3 to 6 months, indicating a standard and efficient procurement process. Meanwhile, 31% encountered delays of 6 to 12 months, likely due to supply chain issues or high demand. An 8% minority experienced delays exceeding a year, reflecting less common but notable setbacks. Additionally, 23% of organisations were unsure of their vehicle delivery times, underscoring the need for better tracking and record-keeping to enhance procurement efficiency and planning.

Anticipated timing for next vehicle purchase or lease

The data reveals that 31% of organisations plan to buy or lease a new vehicle within the next year, while 38% expect to do so within the next two years. Additionally, 15% have no immediate plans for acquiring a new vehicle, and another 15% are considering a future purchase but have not set a specific timeline. Overall, 69% of organisations are preparing to update their fleets within the next two years, demonstrating a proactive approach to addressing future needs. In contrast, a smaller portion either lacks immediate plans or remains undecided about their next acquisition.

Vehicle financing methods

A significant 37% of organisations finance new vehicle purchases through charitable grants, underscoring the vital role of external funding. Another 37% utilise their own savings or reserves, highlighting the importance of long-term financial planning for major acquisitions. Additionally, 11% opt for vehicle leasing to spread costs over time, while an equal 11% rely on fundraising efforts, though this method is less common. Only 4% receive public funding for vehicle purchases, indicating that this source is relatively rare.

'At the Motability Foundation, we understand that Community Transport is a vital service for disabled people across Northern Ireland. I have seen first-hand, on my visits to Northern Ireland, the difference these services make to individuals living in some of the most rural parts of the country. We know it is important to fund both vehicles and capital costs across multi-year grants, in order to make the biggest impact. We are pleased to say Community Transport continues to be prioritised within our strategy over the next 5 years.'
Lisa Jones, Director of Charitable Operations at the Motability Foundation

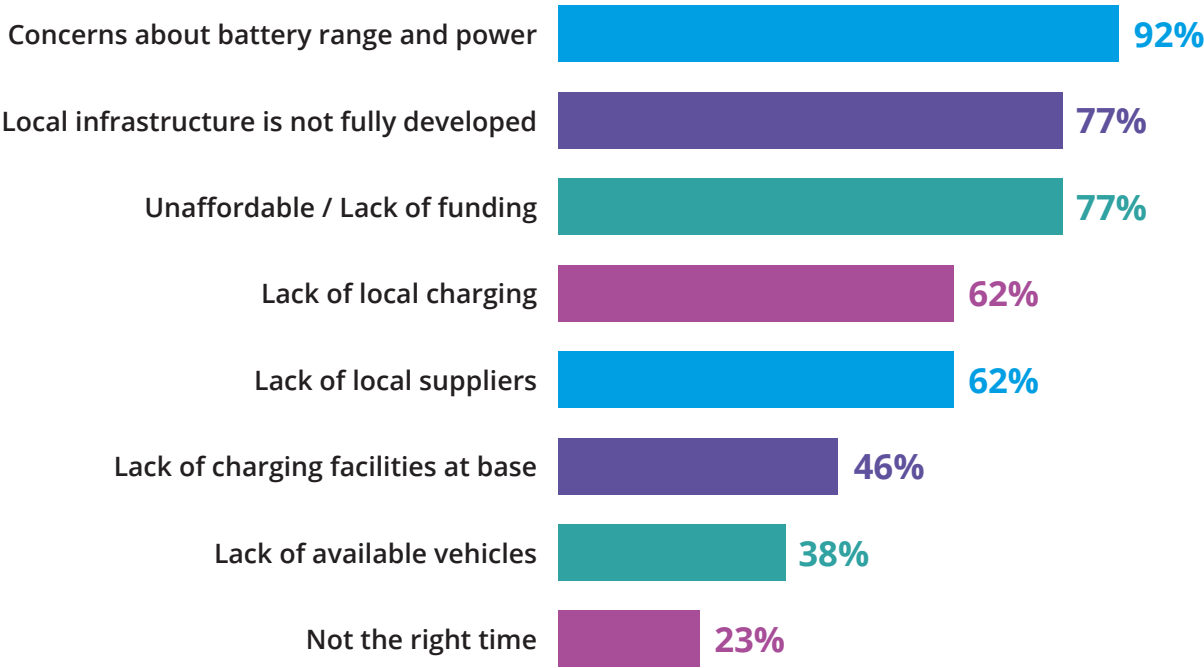
Electric vehicle readiness

Barriers

Across all primary providers, only five organisations have adopted electric vehicles (EVs), representing 3% of the total fleet. Notably, the use of EVs is primarily confined to urban areas due to limitations in battery range and inadequate charging infrastructure. There is a strong consensus among primary providers that the necessary infrastructure and financial capabilities are to not fully realised at present, preventing Community Transport from pursuing a transition to electric vehicles.

Several barriers to broader EV adoption have been identified. The most pressing concern is battery power and range, which affects 92% of organisations. Additionally, 77% face challenges stemming from underdeveloped local infrastructure and financial issues, such as high costs and limited funding. Shortages of local charging stations and a lack of local suppliers' impact 62% of organisations, while 46% express concerns about inadequate charging facilities at depots. Furthermore, 38% report difficulties like limited vehicle availability, delivery delays, supply chain disruptions, and uncertainty about whether this is the right time to adopt EVs.

Operational challenges further complicate the transition; replacing each diesel vehicle requires two EVs, and managing recharging for drivers who start and finish their shifts at home adds to the complexity. Moreover, the time required to charge vehicles remains a key consideration, although advancements in infrastructure, such as the installation of super-fast chargers, are helping to mitigate these issues. Concerns about the performance and reliability of current EV minibus options, coupled with a shortage of locally qualified technicians for maintenance and servicing, present additional obstacles. While there is no opposition to electrification, a range of significant operational and logistical challenges must be addressed to effectively meet the needs of Community Transport. Urgent action is needed to establish a sustainable framework for this transition.



Charging infrastructure

While many respondents have access to dedicated charging infrastructure, 23% face challenges due to insufficient fast-charging capacity, hindering their ability to meet service delivery routes and schedules. Effective planning is essential, especially for accommodating larger vehicles like minibuses at public charging points. Much of the existing infrastructure is designed primarily for cars, lacking the space and capability to support larger electric vehicles (EVs), which complicates their integration. Therefore, expanding both the capacity and adaptability of charging infrastructure is crucial for successfully adopting EVs and fulfilling operational needs.

Climate action priorities

Survey findings reveal that 54% of organisations are unable to prioritise climate action due to urgent operational and funding challenges. Additionally, 77% do not have a plan in place to achieve net-zero emissions, indicating that environmental concerns are not a primary focus for most Community Transport operators. While organisations recognise the importance of reducing carbon emissions, immediate operational challenges take precedence over long-term environmental goals. To effectively incorporate climate objectives into their operations, organisations need to develop phased, strategic plans tailored to the unique needs of Community Transport. Factoring in long-term operational cost savings, such as those from more sustainable vehicles, would also support these efforts.



Credit: Community Transport: 'Lifeline' for isolated rural passengers at risk - BBC News (Armagh Rural Transport)

Key Issues

Community Transport fleet is ageing, leading to increased maintenance costs. There is a need to support the sector in modernising its fleet and facilitating capital investment.

Over 90% of Community Transport operators vehicles operate on diesel, demonstrating a reliance on this fuel type due to its efficiency and effectiveness for high-mileage and heavy-duty applications.

Electric vehicles are not yet fully viable for Community Transport, particularly in rural areas, due to issues with battery range, lack of local infrastructure, high costs, and inadequate charging facilities.

Calls to action

There is a need for capital investment and support to transition to alternative fuel and vehicle types. This transition must be approached within the context of Community Transport service delivery, ensuring that it is applicable, fair, just and beneficial to rural settings.

Given the reliance on diesel, Community Transport operators collaborate with government and industry partners to explore alternative fuel options, such as hybrid or biofuel technologies, that offer similar efficiency for high-mileage and heavy-duty applications. This will help reduce environmental impact while maintaining operational effectiveness.

To support the transition from diesel to electric or other sustainable alternatives, organisations should actively pursue grants, subsidies, or public funding aimed at promoting greener transportation options. This will help offset the high initial costs of electric vehicles and infrastructure development.

What success would look like



A successful transition to sustainable fuel and vehicle options is essential for maintaining the efficiency and reliability of Community Transport while minimising environmental impact. By securing capital investments and collaborating with government and industry partners, Community Transport organisations can adopt technologies such as hybrid, biofuel, and electric vehicles that align with their specific service delivery needs. Grants and subsidies will help offset costs, facilitating a smooth and equitable shift to greener transport solutions. Ultimately, this transition will foster a sustainable and resilient Community Transport sector, enabling it to continue providing high-quality services while advancing both environmental and social progress.



Credit: Health trusts spend £40m on patient taxis in five years - (CDM Community Transport)

Patricia Davis, a long-time resident of a rural area near Dungannon in County Tyrone, dedicated nearly 40 years of her life to nursing before health challenges forced her to retire.

Her health journey took a difficult turn when poor circulation led to sores on her foot. Despite undergoing a bypass, complications ultimately resulted in the amputation of one of her legs. Now, Patricia uses a prosthetic leg and sometimes relies on a wheelchair to get around.

For Patricia, the loss of her independence has been one of the most significant adjustments.

“I was a gym fanatic and always so independent and I loved driving, but I’ve lost all of that now,” she said. I really do miss it, especially because I have lots of hospital appointments now that I need to attend.”

Patricia found a vital source of support in her local CDM Community Transport service, which now plays a crucial role in her life.

Patricia regularly uses her local Community Transport service to take her to her appointments.

“I honestly don’t know what I would do without it, it’s my lifeline. They take me to my local appointments, but also as far as Belfast when I need to go to the City Hospital.”

4. Staff and volunteers

Community Transport is made possible by the unwavering dedication of volunteers and paid staff. Roles range from vital back-office support to management and leadership, right across to drivers. What stands out from the research is that, regardless of the role, being part of Community Transport is more than just a job, it is a passion. It is about making a meaningful difference, supporting others, and fostering a deep connection with the local community.

Staffing levels

All 13 primary organisations employ paid staff members, highlighting a structured and strategic approach to workforce management within Community Transport. These organisations collectively employ 39 full-time staff in back-office and other roles, averaging three per organisation, along with 21 part-time staff in similar positions, averaging two per organisation. In terms of transportation services, they employ 71 full-time drivers (averaging five per organisation) and 48 part-time drivers (averaging four per organisation).

This staffing structure reflects a deliberate emphasis on full-time positions, particularly for drivers, underscoring the critical need for consistent and reliable transportation services, especially in rural areas. The substantial number of full-time back-office roles further highlights the importance of stable administrative support, essential for managing operations and maintaining service quality. Part-time roles offer necessary flexibility, enabling organisations to manage costs effectively while still delivering vital services.

Overall, the balance between full-time and part-time positions illustrates a well-considered strategy aimed at ensuring operational continuity and efficiency. This approach not only addresses the daily needs of the community but also empowers organisations to adapt to changing demands and resource availability, thereby enhancing their capacity to provide consistent and dependable transport services.



Volunteer level

Across the primary organisations, a total of 139 volunteers have been instrumental in supporting service delivery. Notably, part-time drivers constitute the majority, accounting for 66% of the volunteer base, with an average of 7 part-time drivers per organisation. This significant contribution underscores the critical role that part-time volunteer drivers play in maintaining and expanding service availability.

Full-time volunteer drivers make up 29% of the volunteer workforce, averaging 3 per organisation. Their dedication is essential for ensuring consistent and reliable transportation services. Additionally, 5% of volunteers are engaged in part-time back-office and other roles. The substantial involvement of volunteers, particularly in driving positions, highlights their vital contribution to the organisations’ service delivery capabilities. This dedicated support is crucial for addressing staffing challenges and ensuring the ongoing effectiveness and reach of Community Transport services.

The crucial role of trustees in delivering effective governance and strategic oversight was emphasised, ensuring alignment with organisational objectives and long-term goals. Their contribution to the management structure was identified as essential for upholding accountability, operational efficiency, and informed decision-making. This was recognised as a fundamental aspect of volunteering within the organisation, fostering greater transparency and driving overall effectiveness.

Volunteers and demand

A significant 69% of primary operators reported a shortage of volunteers, indicating that they do not have enough support to meet the demand for their services. Only 8% felt they had adequate volunteer resources, while 23% remained neutral on the matter. This widespread disparity highlights a critical challenge: most organisations operate under whereby they could benefit from more volunteer support, recognising how their support can effectively serve their communities. To tackle this issue, a concerted effort to enhance both volunteer recruitment and retention is essential for maintaining service levels and addressing the growing needs of the community.



National Living Wage

Wage policies in Northern Ireland are fundamental to economic stability, shaping both the quality of life for workers and the resilience of businesses. The National Minimum Wage and National Living Wage establish legally enforced pay thresholds, ensuring a basic income standard for employees. As of April 2024, the National Living Wage for employees aged 21 and over stood at £11.44 per hour, reflecting governmental efforts to address rising living costs. However, the Real Living Wage, determined independently by the Living Wage Foundation, goes further by calculating rates based on actual living expenses.

All the Primary Purpose Operators currently comply with the National Living Wage requirements of £11.44 per hour and demonstrate a clear commitment to promoting economic fairness, with aspirations to exceed these standards. However, despite these intentions they continue to face significant challenges in balancing fair compensation with operational sustainability. Employers particularly in sectors like Community Transport, face mounting recruitment difficulties and financial pressures as they strive to provide equitable pay while maintaining financial viability. These challenges emphasise the pivotal role of wage standards in addressing economic disparities and fostering a motivated workforce.

To address these recruitment challenges, primary operators have expressed a desire to explore the adoption of the Real Living Wage to better reflect true living costs, offering employees a fairer standard of pay. However, there is an awareness that adopting this higher rate presents additional financial challenges, particularly given current budget constraints. They remain committed to doing more to attract the skilled workforce that is crucial to their services.

Challenges experienced in staff recruitment

Over the past year, 85% of managers have reported significant difficulties in recruiting staff, underscoring a critical issue that could compromise organisational capacity and service delivery. Attracting paid staff is challenging due to factors such as rural locations, limited resources, and increased competition, but also because of the broader terms and conditions offered by Community Transport operators. Although wage levels are a key factor, they are not the only issue. Community Transport providers often fall short when compared to public sector roles, particularly in areas like pension schemes and additional benefits, making it more difficult to attract and retain skilled workers. Furthermore, these organisations support some of the most vulnerable members of the community, often operating in challenging circumstances and assuming a level of risk that exceeds many comparable roles.

Recognising the value of this work is essential. The skills, commitment, and performance of staff in this sector are critical to maintaining high-quality services and addressing vital community needs. These contributions must be reflected in budgetary allocations to ensure fair compensation and support for those undertaking such indispensable roles in society. Addressing recruitment issues holistically is therefore paramount to sustaining the effectiveness and long-term viability of Community Transport operators.

Challenges experienced in Volunteer Recruitment

While only 8% of organisations reported having a sufficient volunteer base, there has been a positive trend in volunteer recruitment over the past year. Specifically, 62% of primary organisations noted an increase in volunteer numbers, reflecting encouraging progress in recruitment efforts. However, 23% of organisations experienced a decline, and 15% were uncertain about recent changes. These mixed results indicate that, although many organisations are successfully expanding their volunteer base, others continue to face recruitment challenges or see clear volunteer trends.

While the role and contribution of volunteers remain invaluable to the success of Community Transport, the changing nature of volunteering presents new challenges. Balancing and protecting the needs and availability of volunteers with the service delivery requirements is critical. This is particularly important given the dependency and high needs of the passengers relying on Community Transport.

Organisations must ensure that their reliance on volunteers is sustainable and does not lead to overburdening or burnout, which could jeopardise both volunteer retention and service quality. To address these issues effectively, it is essential to focus on understanding and mitigating the specific factors that hinder recruitment for organisations facing declines or uncertainties while continuing to support and develop volunteer engagement strategies for those experiencing growth.

The cost-of-living crisis is severely impacting the recruitment and retention of unpaid drivers, with rising costs becoming a determining factor in individuals’ ability to volunteer and contribute to the vital work of Community Transport. No volunteer should be out of pocket for their service. The Approved Mileage Allowance Payment (AMAP) is intended to reimburse employees and volunteers for using their own vehicles in the course of their duties, without incurring tax or administrative burdens. However, the current AMAP rate of 45p per mile has remained unchanged since it was last reviewed in 2012. Since then, motoring costs—including fuel, insurance, repairs, and equipment—have risen by over 44%. An increase in the AMAP rate is long overdue to ensure that no volunteer is left out of pocket for their essential contributions.

CTA, along with the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) and other key groups, has been urging HM Treasury to conduct a fair, transparent, and regular review of the AMAP. The goal is to secure an inflationary uplift to the 2012 rate, ensuring volunteers are adequately reimbursed and able to continue providing these crucial services.

| Key Issues | Calls to action |
|--|--|
| Challenges in attracting and retaining staff, primarily due to the inability to match the competitive terms and conditions offered by the public/private sector, affecting the development of a skilled workforce. | Promote Community Transport as a career path, advocating for long-term funding to improve job security, reduce turnover, and enhance working conditions, while strengthening public perception of sector stability. |
| The Community Transport workforce is ageing, with many older employees working beyond retirement age, especially in driving roles. Succession planning is needed to replace experienced staff. | Implement recruitment strategies to attract a diverse talent pool, while offering flexible options and support for older employees, ensuring compliance with insurance age limits and a balanced workforce. |
| Increased demand for services, coupled with insufficient staffing and resources, is resulting in higher workloads for current staff. | Advocate for additional funding to increase staffing and resources, reducing workloads and meeting the rising demand for services. |
| Volunteer levels have not returned to pre-pandemic levels, requiring more resources and time to engage and support volunteers. | Recognise the evolving role of volunteerism in Community Transport and adopt a sustainable service model that balances volunteer support with professional staffing, considering the growing complexity of operations and service demands. |
| The commitment to the National Living Wage adds financial pressure with current budgets not adjusted to accommodate these costs. | Secure budgets to ensure fair compensation and align terms and benefits with industry standards to maintain a motivated workforce. Additionally, account for future financial increases, such as the National Insurance Contributions (NICS) uplift, which are not currently included in existing budgets. |

What success would look like

By implementing these actions, Community Transport will evolve into a stable and appealing career path, offering competitive wages and solid working conditions. A diverse, well-supported workforce will thrive, combining fresh talent with experienced personnel. Increased funding will alleviate staffing pressures, enabling services to meet demand, while volunteer contributions will continue to be highly valued but not essential for day-to-day operations. This approach will lead to a sustainable, professional Community Transport sector that serves the needs of both employees and communities effectively.



Suzanne Buchanan represents one of the many invaluable staff and volunteers within the Community Transport sector in Northern Ireland.

After battling cancer and being out of work, Susanne decided she wanted to go back to work and pursue her passion of driving. This opportunity allowed her to learn new skills while also giving back to her local community.

While awaiting her driving test, Suzanne volunteered with Easilink for four months, during which she gained invaluable experience and built meaningful connections.

Suzanne was able to witness first-hand the profound impact of Easilink's work, and after passing her driving test with flying colours, she now works as a driver for Easilink.

"You realise that for some people, you're their only contact to the outside world, and it means a lot just to be able to do something for somebody else,"

Working with Easilink has given Suzanne a renewed sense of purpose and fulfilment. For her, this work is far more than just a job, it is a way to give back to the community that supported her during her illness.

"What Easilink does, the drivers, volunteers, everybody, it is not just a job, it is a vocation because you have to want to do it," Susanne explained. "I go home every day with the fulfilment that comes with helping and supporting people."

Suzanne Buchanan, Easilink

5. Community Transport strategic relationships

Context

Perceptions of governmental and organisational support present a significant opportunity for growth and alignment among primary operators of Community Transport (CT). Community Transport operators are eager to engage actively and collaborate across departments and with relevant operators. Community Transport plays a key role across various sectors, including health, social care, rural development, and environmental sustainability, contributing valuable benefits to each. By fostering collaboration these organisations can address the diverse needs of the communities they serve, improving access and outcomes for individuals. Strengthening cross-departmental relationships will help better integrate Community Transport into wider policy frameworks, ensuring it can effectively meet the evolving needs of passengers and maximise its impact.

A disconnect exists between DfI's financial contributions and the perceived level of support for Community Transport among primary operators. While DfI remains the sector's primary investor, this gap highlights the need for closer collaboration and mutual understanding to strengthen relationships with service providers.

Primary providers have raised concerns that, despite providing detailed passenger trip data to the Department, these insights have not led to policy-level funding decisions or meaningful sectoral changes. Addressing this perception gap will require clear communication and collaboration. A more strategic approach to engagement could help align funding strategies with the specific needs of Community Transport, enabling more effective use of resources.

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) shares several key priorities with Community Transport, particularly in areas such as rural development and environmental sustainability. However, recent changes, such as the transfer of Assisted Rural Transport Scheme (ARTS) payments and uncertainty surrounding the review of Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI), have raised concerns among operators. These changes are seen by some as an indication of reduced commitment to Community Transport. Despite these challenges, there are opportunities to strengthen the alignment between Community Transport and DAERA's objectives. By highlighting the sector's contributions to rural communities and environmental goals, there is potential to enhance its perceived value and foster more consistent support.

During the budgetary challenges of 2023, Peter May, Deputy Permanent Secretary, emphasised the importance of Community Transport by advising against budget reductions to his counterpart at the DfI. He warned that such cuts could negatively impact vulnerable populations and lead to increased costs for statutory Health and Social Care (HSC) transport and taxi services needed for delayed interventions. Demonstrating the critical role of Community Transport in improving health outcomes and well-being could further strengthen engagement with the Department of Health (DoH). In August 2024, Minister Nesbitt echoed these concerns in a response to the Community Transport Association (CTA), reaffirming the recognised value of Community Transport at ministerial levels.

In early 2023, the Department for Infrastructure, in collaboration with other executive departments, established a cross-departmental group, which included the Department of Health and DAERA. This group was tasked with maximising the benefits of existing Community Transport services by ensuring more efficient use of current resources and exploring its potential to meet growing demands. The group has committed to further efforts, including conducting a comprehensive review of the Department of Health's Transport strategy. These initiatives have been positively received by the Community Transport sector. While these initiatives are promising, Community Transport providers have stressed the importance of their active involvement in these discussions. Their inclusion is critical to creating a sustainable and effective framework for Community Transport, addressing the challenges faced by passengers, and fostering a more inclusive and responsive sector.

Finally, the report noted that relationships and working practices between primary operators and Health and Social Care Trusts remain inconsistent across Northern Ireland. Recognition of Community Transport's contributions varies significantly among trusts, with some operators perceiving limited support and others reporting more neutral or positive engagement. These discrepancies highlight the need for better communication and a stronger focus on the essential role Community Transport plays in patient care and social services. Achieving greater consistency in engagement at the trust level could lead to more unified support, amplifying the overall impact of Community Transport across the region.

Involvement in local transport decision making

The research highlights a significant perception of exclusion among primary operators in local transport decision-making. Specifically, 69% strongly disagree that their organisation is involved, and an additional 15% somewhat disagree, leaving 84% feeling sidelined in the process. Only 8% somewhat agree with their involvement, while 8% are neutral.

This suggests a critical gap in engagement, which may lead to Community Transport needs being overlooked in local planning. Actively involving primary operators in decision-making would ensure their perspectives are considered, leading to more effective alignment between services and community needs. Strengthening this engagement can foster collaboration, resulting in more responsive, inclusive, and impactful transport solutions for underserved areas.

Connection to other voluntary and community groups

Most primary operators feel well connected to other voluntary and community groups in their area. Specifically, 54% strongly agree, and 31% somewhat agree, resulting in 85% of operators having a positive perception of their connections. However, 15% remain neutral, indicating some uncertainty or room for improvement.

These findings highlight strong collaboration and networking among primary operators and other groups, which likely enhances cooperation, resource sharing, and collective problem-solving. This connectedness contributes to the overall effectiveness and impact of community services. Nevertheless, the 15% who are neutral suggest there may still be opportunities to further strengthen these relationships and improve integration within the wider community.

Key Issues

Community Transport is not being included within wider regional and national transport strategies. It is seen as a separate entity out with the wider public transport ecosystem.

Many Community Transport operators perceive that key departments, including the Department for Infrastructure, Department for Communities, and Department of Health, do not fully recognise the value of these services. This perception has led to a **disconnect between funding levels and the acknowledgment of Community Transport's importance.**

Majority of primary operators feel excluded from local transport decision-making, highlighting the need for greater involvement and representation to ensure Community Transport needs are considered in planning and policy decisions.

Calls to action

Community Transport needs to be fully engaged and included within national, regional, and local transport strategies.

Opportunity to address these perception gaps through improved communication and targeted advocacy, highlighting the critical role of Community Transport in rural development, healthcare, and social services to secure stronger support and investment from key stakeholders.

Undertake mapping exercise as to what level of representation Community Transport currently has at a local and regional Governmental Department level.

What success would look like



Success would be characterised by the seamless integration of Community Transport into national, regional, and local transport strategies, positioning it as a vital and respected component of the public transport ecosystem. Community Transport would actively participate in transport and accessibility discussions, ensuring its presence when policies, strategies, plans, and funding decisions are being formulated.

Collaboration would be paramount, with Community Transport working closely with key government departments and other stakeholders to develop innovative and integrated solutions that effectively address the diverse needs of all users. This collaborative approach would not only enhance service delivery but also ensure that Community Transport is recognised for its significant contributions to creating an inclusive and efficient transport network.



“Community Transport provides services to shops, but it also provides services to the GP, the hospital, the dentist and the community, thereby breaking down isolation. There is common cause among several other Ministers and me in that regard. When I look at the costs that some of my Executive colleagues’ face in providing transport, particularly for patients in the health service, I see that Community Transport could play a vital role in providing a cost-effective alternative.⁶”

“Community Transport is uniquely placed to assist the Department of Health and other Departments with meeting rising transport costs. It will not suit every set of circumstances, as there will always be circumstances in which patients require other forms of transport, but Community Transport is ideally placed to assist with a significant proportion of the challenges that the Department of Health, the Department for Communities, DAERA and other Departments face to reduce isolation, thus ensuring that people can attend their health appointments etc.⁷”

⁶ Community Transport: 11 Jun 2024: Northern Ireland Assembly debates <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/ni/?id=2024-06-11.4.87#g4.91>

⁷ Transport Costs: Health Trusts (Oral Answers to Questions — Infrastructure – in the Northern Ireland Assembly at 2:30 pm on 1 July 2024. <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/ni/?id=2024-07-01.3.74>

6. Legislation and policy

Licensing

Licensing requirements pose major challenges for Community Transport in Northern Ireland, significantly increasing costs and demanding considerable time from drivers to obtain a full Category D1 license. These regulations differ from broader UK standards.

Primary providers have expressed concern that an overly strict regulatory regime is being applied in Northern Ireland, which is undermining the sustainability of Community Transport services. Many Community Transport providers struggle to bear the additional costs of training drivers to commercial standards, and recruiting drivers with the necessary licenses has proven challenging, leading to significant driver shortages.

Although driver and operator licensing in Northern Ireland are based on the same EU laws that is still being used in the UK, the regulatory approach in Great Britain is notably less stringent. In contrast, the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) in Northern Ireland has taken a different interpretation, resulting in a stricter stance on licensing requirements. For driver licensing, the DfI mandates that all “paid drivers” must hold a full Category D or D1 licence, defining a “paid driver” as anyone receiving compensation beyond out-of-pocket expenses. Regarding operators, the DfI position is that any payment for transport services—whether directly from passengers or indirectly through grant aid—beyond what is strictly necessary to cover running costs is considered commercial activity. This interpretation places the activity outside the “exclusively non-commercial purposes” exemption outlined in Article 4 of EC Regulation 1071/2009, rendering it ineligible for a Section 10B licence. These disparities overlook the commitment of Community Transport drivers, while Northern Ireland’s rural geography intensifies the need for sufficient staffing and resources. Collectively, these factors threaten the sustainability of current services and present substantial future risks if not effectively addressed.

Addressing these barriers requires a reassessment of the necessity and impact of licensing and certification requirements. Solutions could include implementing grace periods or other adjustments to ease compliance challenges. Partnering with the Department of Economy and Skills to align with apprenticeship and workforce initiatives could provide valuable recruitment opportunities. Additionally, implementing a driver training and employment programme would support recruitment efforts and help develop a sustainable workforce to meet future demands. Alternatively, a reassessment by the Department of their current position could also be considered.

Permit structure

In Northern Ireland, the overall permitting framework has not implemented the necessary legislation to allow permits for AB bus routes. Unlike in Great Britain, where Community Transport operators can deliver AB services under a suitable permit, Northern Ireland lacks these provisions. This has resulted in the absence of scheduled AB routes in Northern Ireland, which are commonly available in other parts of the UK. Consequently, Community Transport providers in Northern Ireland are unable to offer the consistent and predictable services that are crucial for integrating isolated communities into broader transport networks. This legislative gap creates a disparity in the availability of equitable transport systems across the UK.

Community Transport Resources

Rural passengers face significant disparities in transportation access compared to the use of the Smart Pass on Translink public services. This disparity restricts rural mobility, limiting access to essential services, employment, and social opportunities. Similarly, for those relying on Community Transport, including DAL and DATS, as their primary option, this can limit the type and frequency of service available to them.

Public awareness is another issue; many are unfamiliar with Community Transport or how to access it. Despite its benefits for isolated individuals, limited advertising, rising demand, and high refusal rates hinder its reach. Stigma also deters potential users, as some associate it with embarrassment or irrelevance. Overcoming these barriers is essential to ensuring Community Transport remains accessible, sustainable, and inclusive.

Funding instability compounds these challenges. Allocated through a “Discretionary Budget,” Community Transport funding is neither guaranteed nor consistent, creating uncertainty for providers. This unpredictability impedes future planning, service expansion, and long-term investments. Users, particularly in isolated areas, worry about service continuity, while organisations struggle to serve those who depend on them. Including Community Transport in the “Statutory Budget,” as highlighted in the DfI Equality Report, would enhance its stability and sustainability. In Northern Ireland, a “Statutory Budget” refers to government-allocated funding that is guaranteed to support essential public services and responsibilities. This would ensure that funding is legally mandated and prioritised, providing Community Transport with the stable financial support it needs to operate effectively.

Community Transport in Northern Ireland is facing significant challenges, including regulatory discrepancies, funding instability, and resource limitations, all of which threaten its sustainability and effectiveness. Strict licensing requirements, such as the need for all paid drivers to hold a full Category D1 license, impose substantial costs and exacerbate ongoing driver shortages. The lack of licensing alignment between Northern Ireland and Great Britain restricts Community Transport providers’ ability to deliver consistent services and integrate isolated communities into broader transport networks. Moreover, the absence of scheduled AB routes, due to legislative gaps, and reliance on an unpredictable discretionary funding structure, further destabilise the sector. Rural passengers face particular challenges, with limited access to transport options and fare benefits, alongside low public awareness, and societal stigma, which hinder the sector’s full potential. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive reassessment of licensing standards, stable funding allocations, and legislative reforms to ensure Community Transport can continue supporting isolated populations and contribute to a more equitable and integrated transport system across the UK.

| Key Issues | Calls to action |
|--|--|
| In 2018, the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) introduced new driver licensing rules for minibus drivers in Northern Ireland, requiring a full D1 license and Driver Qualification Card (DQC), creating challenges for Community Transport and differing from the rest of the UK. | CTA to explore potential solutions to align driver licensing rules in Northern Ireland with the rest of the UK , addressing the challenges posed by the D1 license and DQC requirements. |
| Growing demand for semi-scheduled and scheduled routes in Northern Ireland highlights the need for more accessible transportation options , requiring legislative changes, especially the introduction of Section 22-type permits. | Lobby and campaign for legislative changes to introduce Section 22-type permits in Northern Ireland , enabling Community Transport operators to meet the growing demand for semi-scheduled and scheduled services and improve accessibility in underserved areas. |
| Rural passengers face inequality in transportation access for concessionary fares, in comparison to Smart Pass for Translink public transport. | Campaign for equal concessionary fare schemes , ensuring that rural Community Transport users have the same unlimited access to transportation through Smart Pass benefits, as enjoyed by public transport users. |
| Community Transport remains under a ‘Discretionary Budget,’ creating uncertainty around annual budget allocations and long-term financial stability. | Advocate for Community Transport to be moved to the ‘Statutory Budget’ based upon the EQIA impacts and the recognised role of rural Community Transport as a key mitigation within the DfI Equality Report. |
| Disparities between UK and Irish Community Transport sectors in operating conditions, policies, and procedures hinder collaboration and limit the sector’s growth and effectiveness. | Promote policy alignment and closer collaboration between UK and Irish Community Transport sectors , removing operational barriers and enhancing cooperation and growth. |

What success would look like



This would involve aligning driver licensing rules with the UK, enabling the introduction of Section 22-type permits to expand services and improve accessibility in underserved areas. Community Transport would be included in the ‘Statutory Budget,’ ensuring financial stability. Closer collaboration between the UK and Irish Community Transport sectors would eliminate barriers and enhance sector efficiency.



Credit: Newry and Mourne Community Transport



Credit: Down Community Transport

7. Summary

Community Transport serves as a lifeline for individuals and communities, connecting people to essential services that underpin their health, well-being, and independence. However, this vital sector is facing significant challenges that jeopardise its ability to support those who depend on it most. At the core of the issue lies a lack of stable and sufficient funding. This financial instability prevents operators from meeting rising demand and hinders their capacity to plan and improve services. Short-term funding cycles further compound these challenges, leaving operators unable to respond effectively to evolving community needs. To safeguard this essential service, government departments must commit to increased, multi-year funding that accounts for inflation. Future reviews should prioritise developing a funding model centred on full cost recovery, enabling operators to deliver reliable, sustainable transport. Collaborative working and focused advocacy will be vital next steps to secure the long-term financial commitments required to meet community needs.

For many individuals, particularly older adults and people with disabilities, Community Transport is often the sole means of accessing healthcare, local towns, and essential services. However, reductions in public transport routes particularly in rural areas, coupled with funding cuts, have left operators struggling to meet the increasing demand for services. Limited service hours and insufficient resources exacerbate inequalities, leaving vulnerable groups further isolated.

Addressing these issues requires sustainable funding models that ensure transport services not only meet healthcare-related needs but also preserve the social activities that the Rural Transport Fund was originally designed to support. These activities have a far-reaching impact on independence, integration, and overall quality of life. Additionally, developing stronger working partnerships with local health and social care providers, as well as councils, will better align services with the needs and priorities of users. Support and engagement of the commercial sector are also key to achieving sustainability within Community Transport. This is an area where CTA is actively developing and represents a significant opportunity for further growth.

The condition of vehicles within Community Transport fleets has a direct impact on service reliability and passenger experience. Ageing vehicles are expensive to maintain, prone to breakdowns, and reliant on diesel, which creates environmental challenges. Transitioning to sustainable alternatives is essential for reducing costs and improving reliability. However, the substantial capital investment required remains a significant barrier. While electric vehicles show promise, primary purpose operators face unique obstacles, including development, high purchase costs, and limited battery ranges. The sector must actively pursue grants and subsidies to support the adoption of greener technologies, working closely with government and industry partners to identify cost-effective, environmentally friendly solutions aligned with service needs. A phased replacement strategy, underpinned by targeted funding, will modernise fleets, reduce environmental impact, and enhance reliability for passengers.

The people driving Community Transport, including its staff and volunteers, are the lifeblood of the sector. However, it is equally important to acknowledge that funding pressures and uncertainty within the sector have created considerable strain. Low wages, difficult working conditions, and an ageing workforce have made recruitment and retention increasingly challenging. Volunteers, who are vital to the Community Transport sector, have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels. This presents challenges for operators in planning and ensuring volunteer flexibility, while also maintaining high-quality, reliable services within their organisations. Without adequate staffing, communities risk losing access to critical services. To address this, the sector must promote Community Transport as a fulfilling career path, offering better wages, job security, and improved working conditions. Recruitment strategies should focus on attracting diverse talent while providing support for older employees and balancing professional staff with volunteer contributions. Strengthening partnerships with training organisations and increasing public awareness will be essential to reshaping the sector's image and building its capacity to meet growing demand.

By embedding Community Transport into transport planning at all levels, its vital role within the public transport ecosystem can be fully recognised. Currently, it is often excluded from national and regional strategies, which limits its effectiveness and recognition. Many operators feel disconnected from key decision-making processes, hindering their ability to secure the necessary support and investment. Strengthening communication and collaborative working across government departments, alongside mapping existing representation, will amplify the sector's voice and influence, ensuring Community Transport is included in transport strategies and demonstrating its value to policymakers.

Legislative and policy barriers continue to constrain the sector's ability to meet community needs. For example, the driver licensing rules in Northern Ireland differ significantly from those in the rest of the UK, where a stricter stance has been adopted, limiting operational flexibility and creating resource challenges. Rural passengers who rely on Community Transport face further inequities, when compared to smart pass usage available on Translink Public transport. Additionally, the lack of legislative support for semi-scheduled routes, which could expand transport options in underserved areas, exacerbates the issue. Addressing these barriers requires aligning driver licensing rules with UK standards, advocating for equitable fare schemes, and introducing legislative provisions such as Section 22 permits. Collaborative efforts with policymakers and stakeholders are crucial to ensuring that legislative reforms effectively meet the needs of local communities.

8. Conclusion

Community Transport is crucial for promoting inclusion, independence, and opportunity for individuals and communities. Addressing the sector's challenges requires immediate, coordinated, and dynamic action.

Stable funding, modernised fleets, a resilient workforce, strategic integration, and policy reform are not just essential they are the very foundation of Community Transport's future. These critical pillars will empower the sector to grow, innovate, and respond effectively to the ever-evolving needs of communities. Without them, the sector risks failing to deliver the reliable, efficient, and inclusive services that are indispensable for those who depend on them.

By tackling these areas, Community Transport can transform into a more sustainable, inclusive, and dependable service, continuously meeting the diverse and changing needs of communities. The next phase of this research must prioritise collaboration, advocacy, and actionable plans to secure the long-term success and sustainability of Community Transport services.

Credit: Community transport for vulnerable users threatened with closure due to pandemic (Easilink Community Transport)





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Community Transport Association

91 Princess Street
Manchester
M1 4HT

0345 130 6195
niteam@ctauk.org

www.ctauk.org

x.com/CTAUK1

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