

Serving Northern Ireland: Community Transport During Coronavirus

What is Community Transport?

Community transport is a non-profit service that fulfils a social purpose and community benefit, often where the market has failed to provide services that cater to the full range of community needs.

Before March this year, community transport was often the only accessible transport option available for many people living in rural areas and small towns across Northern Ireland.

Outside of Belfast and Derry, 11 Rural Community Transport Partnerships (RCTPs) provide demand responsive services, known as Dial-a-Lift, under section 10b permits. These services offer door-to-door transport for those with no other transport options, usually due either to the rurality of the area in which they live, or disability.

Funded by the Department for Infrastructure through the Rural Transport Fund, the service carries over 350,000 passengers annually. Helping people in rural areas get to shops, health appointments and meet friends, Dial-a-Lift is a vital lifeline for those with mobility issues and those who live in remote locations with no access to other transport links.

The service is integral to reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation for those in vulnerable situations in communities across the north. Many service users state that they would be unable to leave their home to access basic services or socialise if it were not for the help provided by community transport. Colleen, a service user in Tyrone, describes how important community transport has been for her:

'I was lonely at home and I'd lost my husband and I was just not at all myself...I went in to a wee corner and I didn't want to come out after my husband died. I was just near a breakdown. I was on medication, but once I started going on the bus and got socialising, I stopped and feel better.'

People with no access to transport in isolated areas also face a higher cost of living. With limited shopping choice they face increased costs for groceries, clothing and every day necessities. This adds an element of poverty to social isolation and exclusion. Through community transport, people are not only able to improve their mental and physical wellbeing but are also able to shop in local towns and reduce household costs.

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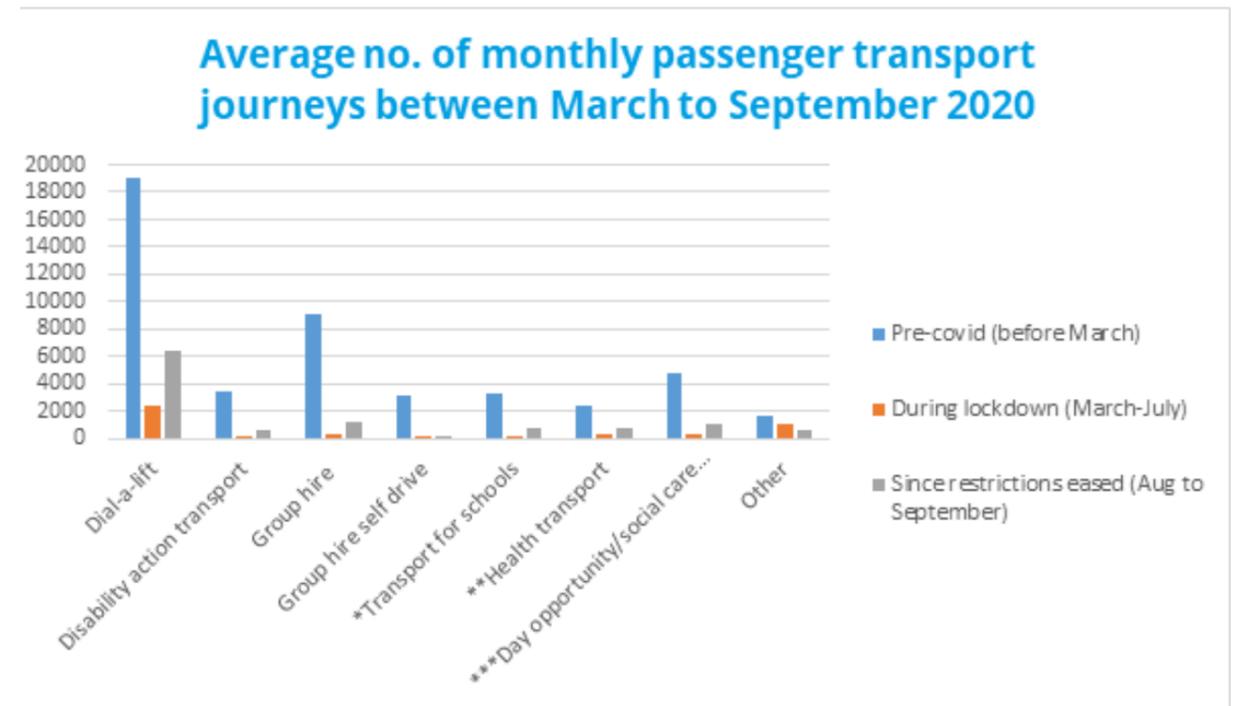
How has the landscape changed for community transport in Northern Ireland during the pandemic?

The coronavirus pandemic has shifted how community transport operates in Northern Ireland – core community transport services have suffered a significant decline, with considerable financial impacts, and members have adapted their service offering to cater to new demands, such as food and medicine deliveries. To get a deeper insight into how the sector has been affected and the new ways in which they are serving their local communities, we surveyed several of CTA's community transport members in Northern Ireland.

Our survey sought to gather information on how services have changed both over the lockdown period and since restrictions on travel have mostly eased across Northern Ireland, and we were interested in how these figures compare with service levels and finances before the pandemic. The data therefore captures information from three key periods – before March, between March and July, and from August to early October.

Effects on passenger transport services

Social distancing and shielding measures significantly impacted core passenger transport services operated by community transport organisations in Northern Ireland, with five out of seven core services reducing by over 90%, dial-a-lift by 87% and health transport by 84%, over the lockdown period. It was striking that health transport journeys reduced by the least of all the service types, showing how vital community transport is in enabling access to services essential to users' health and wellbeing.



Please note that:
 *Transport undertaken for schools is provided under group hire
 **Health transport is provided under Dial-a-Lift or Disability Action Transport (DATS)
 ***Day opportunities are provided under Dial-a-Lift, DATS or group hire

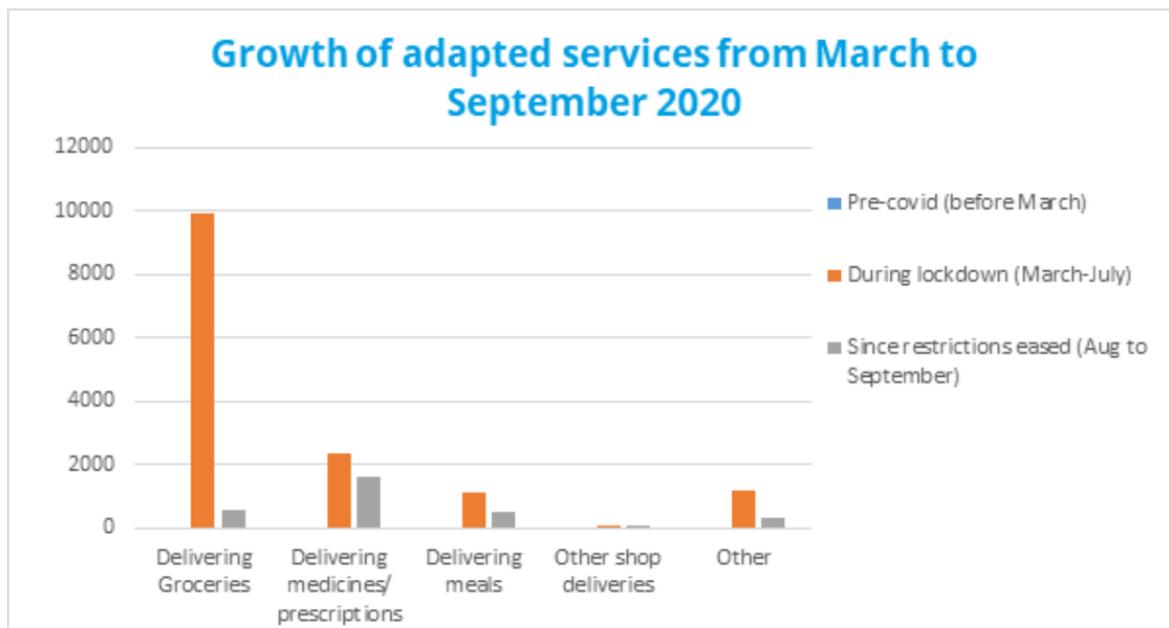
While journey numbers have recovered since restrictions were eased in August, they only constitute a fraction of the journeys that were made before lockdown began in March. For example, the average number of monthly dial-a-lift journeys after August totalled 6,498 across eleven organisations; before March, dial-a-lift journey numbers totalled 18,986, meaning that dial-a-lift is only operating at 34% of usual demand. Yet, this is the second highest rate of recovery amongst the core services, topped only by health transport journeys which are now running at 37% of usual demand. Transport for schools is operating at a quarter of usual levels, day opportunity/social care transport at 24%, and disability action transport at 20%. Most concerning are the figures from group hire, with services where RCTP supplies the driver only running 13% of usual journeys, and group hire self-drive running a mere 4%.

With money from group hire services constituting a high proportion of most community transport organisations' income, members have raised concerns about the impact that coronavirus will have on the sustainability of their organisations in the long term – in particular, fears have been shared about whether group hire will ever recover to pre-covid levels, and how that financial loss can be made up for.

Growth of new services

Non-passenger transport services

With many passengers, particularly those in high risk categories, unable to physically board community transport vehicles, CT operators have been helping to bridge the gap between users and their needs by delivering essentials directly to them. The below graph shows how vital the sector has been in providing groceries, medicines and prescriptions, meals and other shop deliveries to both their usual members and those in the wider community who are not usually registered with their local community transport provider. Even with some dial-a-lift and shopper services resuming in recent months, many of these deliveries have continued.



Members have also told us that in addition to delivering necessities to people's homes, they have been transporting personal protective equipment and treats to cheer passengers up, like cake, to care homes, and doing deliveries for their local foodbank, Mens Sheds and independent retailers, as shown in the 'other' bars of the graph above.

Non-transport services

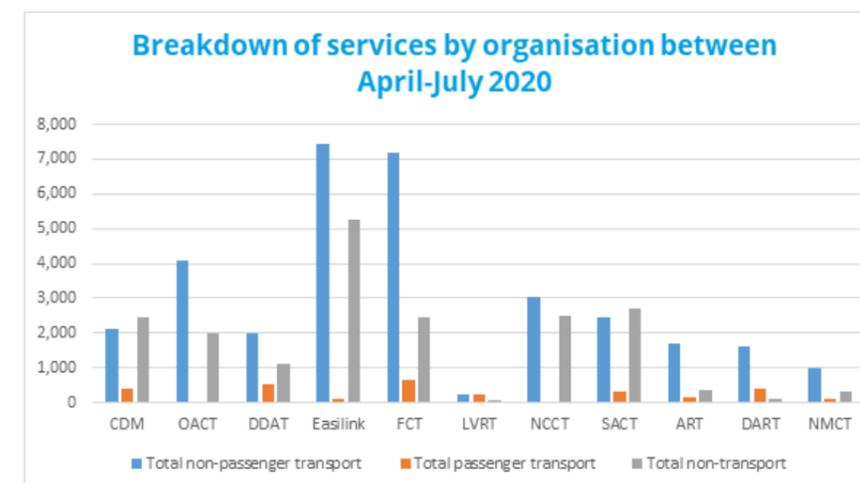
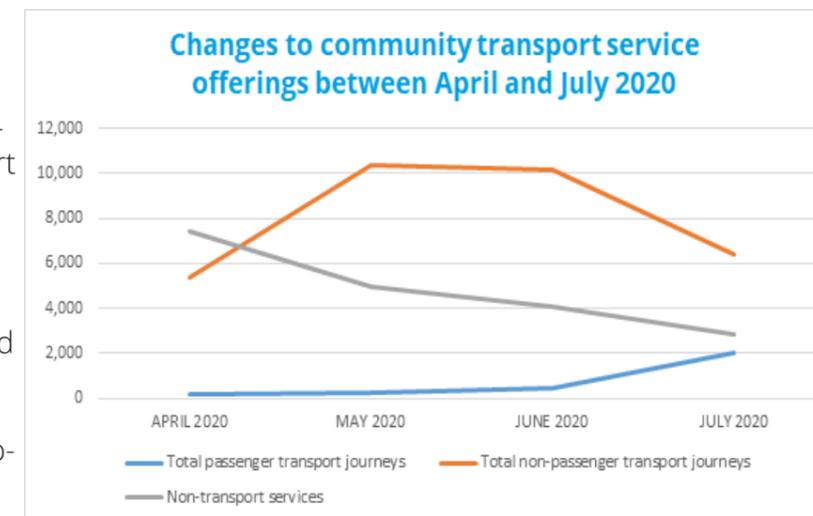
In an effort to make up for the absence of personal contact, CT organisations across Northern Ireland have been staying in contact with their members by other means. All of the members we spoke to shared stories of how befriending calls gradually lengthened over time. Where users had initially been quick to reassure their local CT that they were managing fine in isolation, as the months wore on, they were keen to chat further and for longer, showing how important community transport is to tending to their users' sense of connectedness and wellbeing.

During these phone calls, organisations were able to get a sense of their users' needs and to provide them with the support that they needed. South Antrim Community Transport, for example, helped to connect one passenger with a dog walking service so that her guide dog could continue to be exercised while she was shielding in her home. They also connected their volunteers with other volunteering opportunities to ensure that they still felt connected and purposeful. Both of these examples demonstrate the signposting role that community transport organisations often play for their communities.

Overview of service change

The graph to the right shows the rise and fall of passenger transport, non-passenger transport, and non-transport services.

It charts the rise of deliveries and telephone befriending services at the beginning of lockdown, as passenger transport services ceased to run, and shows how, as community transport organisations implemented cleaning procedures and social distancing, passenger transport journeys began to tentatively pick up and replace deliveries. It also shows how, even with passenger transport journeys increasing, CTs are still continuing to provide delivery services to passengers and other organisations, as well as to stay in touch with those members who continue to shield.



The ratio of passenger transport, non-passenger transport and non-transport services does, however, differ according to organisation, and the differences can be observed in the graph to the left, which also provides a comparison of the overall scale of each organisation.

Financial impacts

During the pandemic, organisations have been able to rely on a range of measures to cushion the financial impact of lockdown and reduced services. Firstly, with reduced use of vehicles, many have been able to save on some of their variable costs, such as fuel and maintenance. Secondly, some have been able to benefit from additional funding from district councils and third sector schemes which has helped with the cost of delivering local food parcels and purchasing safety equipment. Most importantly, the government's Job Retention Scheme and the continuation of ARTS funding at pre-covid levels has been fundamental to sustaining organisations so far.



Yet, for many organisations, there are concerns that, in the long term, these cost saving mechanisms will not be enough to replace the loss of group hire income. These fears are multi-layered – firstly, with a growing understanding that a vaccine will not be found for the foreseeable future, there are fears of suppressed demand, with the possibility that people will choose not to travel to protect their health. Secondly, there are concerns about affordability – with social distancing at least halving vehicle capacity, organisations will have to use double the usual amount of resources (in terms of fuel, maintenance and staffing) to carry the same number of passengers as that before covid. This means that even if demand returns, organisations which hire community transport services to carry groups may not be able to afford these additional costs. Worse, these organisations may close down themselves; with the economy suffering a downturn, we have already seen Age UK branches closing down and there are fears that other community groups will follow.

As such, while all organisations surveyed felt confident that they would be able to sustain operation until the end of the current financial year, the long term future is contingent on the continuation of ARTS funding, especially with the furlough scheme petering out. The loss of group hire services and the reduction of dial-a-lift since March represents as much as £70-£160k of financial loss for CT organisations; if ARTS funding were to be cut, organisations would soon be forced to rely on their reserve funds, which are not only finite but would undercut monies originally reserved for future needs, such as fleet replacement. In fact, a couple of organisations that we spoke to have already had to rely on their reserve funds.

Hence, members were keen to emphasise their gratitude towards the Department for Infrastructure for maintaining core grant funding and to DAERA for continuing ARTS funding for community transport. However, funding cannot stand still; for CT to be viable, grant funding must increase in the next financial year in line with increased operating costs.

Innovating service

Losing the ability to socialise with family and friends, when many of the lifeline services offered by community transport were drastically cut or stopped in March, has been devastating for physical and mental wellbeing.

Soon after lockdown was introduced, however, RCTPs across Northern Ireland innovated and adapted their transport to serve their communities in new ways. This is the story of how community transport worked to become a beacon of hope during these difficult times.

Delivering essentials

With social distancing, shielding and isolating measures in place, many people across Northern Ireland have been unable to leave their homes to access shops, while community transport operators have often been unable to carry passengers aboard vehicles. Instead, to cater to changed circumstances, community transport organisations have adapted their service, in collaboration with local shops, national retailers, local authorities and foodbanks, to deliver essentials to those in need.

Shopping deliveries

Together with local butchers, bakers, greengrocers and shops, Down and Armagh Rural Transport (DART) worked hard to ensure that customers could continue to access essential supplies, while supporting local shops hit by a downturn in trade. Over the lockdown period, DART delivered a staggering 961 food orders for one greengrocer alone, showing how important their delivery service was to protecting local businesses from closing. Similarly, Lagan Valley Rural Transport joined with larger supermarkets, like Sainsbury's, to augment their delivery capacity and fulfil orders for those who opted to shop online while shielding.



Food deliveries

Many other CT organisations, such as Armagh Rural Transport (ART) partnered with food banks, such as The Trussell Trust, to identify and protect some of the community's most vulnerable people against food poverty.

Meanwhile, several RCTPs and other voluntary organisations collaborated with District Councils and the Department for Communities to deliver emergency parcels, containing food and other essentials, to thousands of individuals across Northern Ireland.

“During lockdown we have delivered over 10,000 emergency parcels to hundreds of individuals and families across Fermanagh. Some of these people were our members, but many were not. Our drivers and volunteers have come to know many of these people by name as we visit their homes weekly. Social distancing meant the boxes were dropped at a safe distance, but we were able to have conversations. Many of the people getting helped remarked that they looked forward to seeing the Fermanagh CT driver each week and having a yarn. For many, the Fermanagh CT driver was the only person they had contact with throughout the lockdown period. We were proud to support our community in this way.”

Jason Donaghy, Director of Fermanagh Community Transport

Delivering meals

For those less able to cook, RCTPs worked with other voluntary organisations to deliver ready-made meals. A positive example of this are Out and About Community Transport who collaborated with Mid-Ulster volunteer centre to deliver meals cooked by volunteers every Wednesday and Saturday. The scheme has been so successful that it has continued beyond the easing of restrictions in August. Not only have well over a thousand meals been delivered so far, taking orders from members over the phone each week has been a chance for staff to chat with service users and to find out about their needs beyond meals, which has been heartening for both staff members and meal recipients, alike.



“Thank you for all the valuable support North Coast Community Transport drivers gave the Council during the Covid 19 lockdown. Having access to your resources for the delivery of food parcels across the borough, both door to door and to local community hubs for collection, was a key factor in the success of the Council’s Community Support programme.”

Wendy McCullough, Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council

“Easilink organised most of the delivery of food boxes to the community groups and to people in rural areas. Without that we would have had to bring in a commercial company. We have local vans but wouldn’t have had the capacity or staff and would have had to look at a different delivery model. It was easy to work with Easilink. They had the connections in the areas, excellent local knowledge and, due to the clients they already work with through their core services, they already understood the needs of the people we were targeting and helped us to connect them to services. It was essential to get the scheme operational as soon as possible, given the pandemic. It was a resounding success and we wouldn’t have been able to deliver it without Easilink as a main delivery partner.”

Susan Mullan, Derry City & Strabane District Council

Supporting our members

To make the change from transporting passengers to delivering food was a big change for RCTPs. That is why the CTA issued food delivery guidance and advice, to ensure that our members were able to deliver fresh, affordable and good quality food to those who needed it. It was amazing to see how quickly community transport drivers adapted from transporting vulnerable passengers to understanding the needs of food hygiene and transportation of perishable goods to their service users. Many RCTPs like South Antrim Community Transport have continued to undertake deliveries, partnering with local Spars and other retailers to ensure local residents still have access to essentials. South Antrim and colleagues across the country have been putting the experience and expertise developed in lockdown to good use for the community.



Down CT driver David McMordie (pictured above) visited care homes across the county to deliver much needed supplies.

Delivering PPE

With the pandemic accelerating with each day, RCTPs across Northern Ireland worked hard to protect the most vulnerable in care homes, and those working at the frontline for the country, such as key workers and NHS staff, by delivering personal protective equipment and other essentials. Diane Irwin, manager of ART said, "It was a privilege to support those on the frontline and see the work they were doing to keep the community safe. Being able to provide PPE to staff working 12 hour shifts to ensure that they were safe is what community transport is all about: helping the community work for others." Similarly, David McMordie, driver at Down CT visited care homes across the country to deliver PPE and anything else needed at the home.

"It's unbelievable how much people look forward to the weekly call from staff and this new initiative is greatly alleviating the anxieties of lockdown. So much excellent work takes place behind the scenes from all the staff from designing the menu, making the telephone calls, preparing the meals, planning the routes for delivery and then when the drivers actually deliver the meals it's a great opportunity to check in on everyone, face to face, and have a friendly chat...2 metres away of course!"

Ashley Keane, Manager of Out and About Community Transport (pictured top left)

Tiny Life

Tiny Life is a neonatal charity supplying breast pumps to help families with premature babies to access the breast milk that gives them the best chance to develop. With covid restrictions preventing families from picking up the necessary equipment, several RCTPs volunteered to deliver pumps first to mothers and then back to Tiny Life's office for replacement and cleaning. Kirsty Richardson, Head of Operations at Tiny Life, was warm in her praise for the service provided by Easilink CT, which operate in Strabane and Omagh, 'It is a stressful time for new parents who are away from their newborns in hospital, and the service provided by Easilink has been vital in reassuring them and enabling mothers to be connected to their babies.'



Tiny Life staff member, Meri, hands over a pump for Easilink volunteer, Mona, to deliver

Diane Irwin, manager at Armagh Rural Transport (and pictured with volunteers, below) was similarly pleased to work with Tiny Life, seeing it as an opportunity to help the most vulnerable in the community at the time of greatest need.



"No one is more vulnerable than a premature baby. We just wanted to do what we could to help. Everyone was impacted by the pandemic, which has encouraged volunteers to do what they could to help. It was a privilege to play our part."

Diane Irwin, Manager of Armagh Rural Transport

Medicine and prescription deliveries

Ensuring that the community can continue to access medical care has been similarly important during this time, with RCTPs delivering pre-prescriptions and medicines, as well as continuing to transport people to vital health appointments.

Both Down Community Transport and Newry and Mourne CT are positive examples of this, working with their local chemists not only to deliver medicines but also to provide reassurance and hence build community cohesion. Deborah Boden, Manager of Down CT, shared a story that demonstrates the value of CT for a local family:



"We had several local people contact us to ensure vital medicine was delivered, not only to themselves, but elderly relatives who couldn't leave home. The daughter of a 92-year-old member of our scheme, who was struggling to leave the house to look after her parents, got in touch with us for help. We helped to both collect the prescriptions for her, and go to the chemist to pick up the products she needed which saved her time and trouble. We are always here to put people's minds at rest and take away the worry. Being trusted with the health needs of this woman's parents proves the value of CT. We go out of our way to build relationships and trust with members and their carers."



"Thank goodness for Billy from Newry and Mourne CT! My wife and I both have COPD and as we were shielding we couldn't leave home to get our medication. Billy delivered our medication to the door which was a life-saver for us both."

Ian from Rathfriland, beneficiary of Newry and Mourne CT's medicine delivery service

Health Transport

While the focus of CT has shifted significantly away from transporting passengers, RCTPs have implemented safety and cleaning protocols on board vehicles to ensure that some of the usual services, such as journeys to reach health appointments, could still continue over lockdown. Working with hospitals, RCTPs took patients to MRI scans, for cancer treatments and other life-saving outpatient visits.

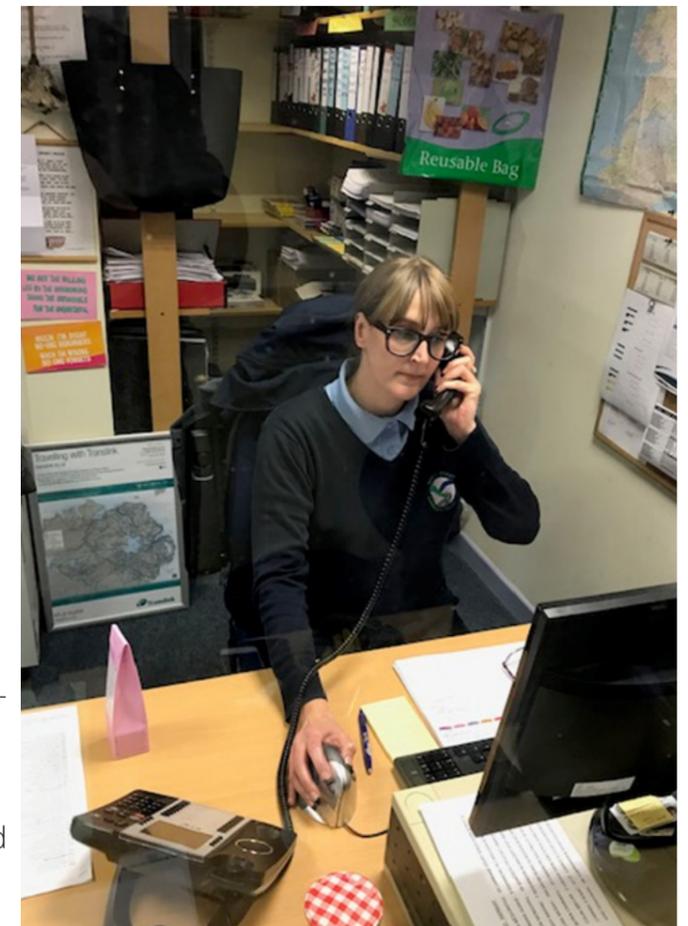
Providing care and reassurance during these journeys have been particularly invaluable at a time when reduced vehicle capacity has meant that many have had to travel to doctors appointments alone. Fermanagh CT manager, Jason Donaghy, tells of the often heartbreaking situations that RCTP staff faced when looking after their passengers:

"Often, it was our drivers who found themselves providing a community social work service. On more than a handful of occasions, drivers were the first to meet with people following their receipt of a cancer diagnosis or the first to talk with people who had lost loved ones and were unable to go see their family and friends for comfort or to grieve properly. A profound instance which demonstrates the value of the service was when one recipient of the emergency food parcels presented to their front door in a suicidal state. Our driver comforted and stayed with the individual, ensuring they were not alone and got them the medical help they needed."

Befriending

Community transport is more than a transport service – it helps people to stay connected to their community, build and maintain friendships, sustain relationships, and stay active and healthy. With many passengers shielding, all RCTPs initiated a telephone befriending service to keep their members' spirits up, identify their needs, and connect them with others in the community who could also help with some of their needs.

North Coast Community Transport made almost 2,500 calls to members and other people in the community who were lonely and isolated, while Lagan Valley CT delivered books, jigsaws and plants to help people stave off the boredom of lockdown. Meanwhile, Down CT not only helped a lady suffering from cancer to reach her medical appointments, but also worked with a local foodbank to deliver an Easter egg to her daughter, given that she could not reach the shops herself. While a seemingly small gesture, this helped to reduce stress for the mother and make life feel normal for a child in a difficult circumstance – a perfect example of community transport going above and beyond.



On the ground

Often social value can be construed as a luxury; nice to have but inessential. Yet, as lockdown measures are prolonged and normality is endlessly delayed alongside it, the value of community and social connectedness feels more central than ever. Even in the face of future uncertainties and unprecedented circumstances, community transport organisations have evolved to protect and foster community spirit and social value, making a difference not only to the recipients of their service, but to volunteers, staff members, local shop owners and wider society. Below, we share several stories from passengers and CT staff to demonstrate the paramountcy of the sector to real people's lives.

From Mary, a CT user

Mary, a longstanding member of CDM Community Transport, which operates in Cookstown and Dungannon, tells us what community transport means to her:



"Community transport is my lifeline. I live in a very rural area, about 5 miles from my nearest village. I would be completely lost without CDM Community Transport! As living on my own is lonely, I enjoy getting out and about seeing friends, family, meeting new passengers and the drivers on the bus. I use the service 2-3 days per week.

"Whenever the awful news broke about 'LOCK-DOWN' I got really scared and worried. CDM's office staff kept in contact with me daily and arranged for a food parcel to be delivered. I looked forward to receiving that friendly call from a team who have done so much good in our local community.

"I was delighted to hear that passenger transport was resuming in July and I feel very comfortable traveling on a CDM minibus. I wear my mask whenever I am traveling in the minibus. There is hand sanitiser to use when you get on the minibus and the drivers wear protective clothing and there is designated seating on the bus.

"I really hope and pray that COVID-19 does NOT affect Community Transport. I would be completely devastated as would a lot of other members. I am so grateful for the service and the staff are exceptional."

From Gerald, a CT driver

The focus of community transport tends often to centre on the value provided to its service users, yet many who work and volunteer for community transport find their work transformative, and particularly important to their sense of wellbeing during the suspension of normality in recent months. Gerald, who has been a driver with Fermanagh Community Transport for 18 years, has worked with passengers through a spectrum of different circumstances and has supported them through personal tragedy, physical and mental health issues, by offering friendship, support and a listening ear. Supporting passengers through a pandemic, though unprecedented, has felt no different for him, as he explains below:

"It is the last day of shielding and it is also the last day of the food parcel deliveries. It is hard to believe that Fermanagh Community Transport have been delivering the parcels now for the past fifteen weeks, and I am just wondering where that time has went to. It has just flew by.

"Every house that I go to today knows that this is the last food parcel they will be getting. Driving home this evening, I was feeling on top of the world with a smile on my face from ear to ear, for every house that I went to today was so grateful for the parcels they have been getting. All I was hearing from people today was thank you so much, or you don't know how much this has meant to us and thank you for taking the time to talk and listen to us.

"It means a lot, the feeling that I got from hearing all this and it was so unbelievable to think that the little part that I played in all of this had a very big impact on people's lives. For people who were shielding on their own, all that they wanted was just someone to talk to and I was glad that I was able to lend that ear, as for some of them each week I was the only person they'd see."

"It kept me living, I'm 93 you know!"

From Bernadette, a CT user

"The service was brilliant, I live 6 miles from the town and anyway I was too scared to leave the house as I'm 76 and didn't feel well, it was great to have the service."

From Maureen, a CT user



From Lesley-ann - CT organiser

As a rural community transport provider, South Antrim Community Transport (SACT) provide a lifeline to those in South Antrim who don't have access to a car or public transport. Lesley-ann tells about how, when social distancing and self-isolation measures were put in place, SACT rose to meet the challenge of their rurally isolated passengers.

"We knew that people were vulnerable and isolated at the best of times because of where they lived, and that was going to become even more prominent after lock-down, so we asked – what can we help with? We knew that shopping and prescriptions were two items that were vital so we decided to provide a service to collect and deliver pre-ordered and pre-paid shopping and prescriptions."

"We've been working with Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council who supply us with food parcels to deliver, and have also teamed up with Toome House who run a lunch club we'd usually take our passengers to. We're now collecting fresh lunches from Toome House and delivering them to their lunch club regulars!"

"We're also offering transport to key workers in hospitals within our catchment area and also to hospitals in Belfast."

"It's also so important that we keep in touch with our passengers. One of our colleagues, Rosey, is contacting our service users on a weekly basis, or twice weekly if we feel that they're particularly vulnerable. And when they see our delivery drivers and have a chat at a distance it might be the only contact they'll have all day. It's about people's mental health, a lot of them live on their own, some of them don't have any family at all, so they absolutely love seeing someone coming to the door or having a cheery voice at the end of the phone; it really makes a difference."



Looking to the future

We don't know how many more lockdowns or circuit breakers there will be before we find a vaccine. What we do know, is that for as long as they can, in whatever way they can, the RCTPs in Northern Ireland will be using every resource at their disposal to support their communities. Without community transport, who would be there to meet the needs of the community?

As some normality of service returns, our members continue to check in with users, deliver groceries and meals, and help people live the best life they can in troubling times. But if this is to continue it relies on our members being properly resourced and receiving the funding they need to ensure that the users of RCTP services get the service they deserve.



Bill Freeman, CTA's Chief Executive, said

"I am so proud of what our CTA members in Northern Ireland were able to achieve in the spring lockdown and what they continue to do. In the face of challenging circumstances, community transport continues to work hard to deliver what is needed all over Northern Ireland. Our members are stepping up, adapting their services and delivering for their communities at this crucial time."

More information

For more examples of the work being done by community transport and regular updates on changes to guidance, be sure to follow CTA on twitter and keep up to date with our blog.

Details of both, and how to get in touch with us if you want more information, are below.

 ctauk.org  [@CTAUK1](https://twitter.com/CTAUK1) hello@ctauk.org

If you need support

If you're a community transport provider who needs support, or if you have any questions about what the Government's guidance means for your organisation, you can find our latest guidance at ctauk.org/covid19-guidance/ or email our advice team via advice@ctauk.org.