



Tavistock Country Bus



Location	Devon
Founded	1981
Legal structure	Registered charity
Description of services	To operate bus services for the benefit of the residents
Key assets	One bus
Employees	No employees
Volunteers	13 full-time (nine are drivers), four part-time
Biggest obstacle to success	Other providers in the area competing with the business
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Local Authority – Third Sector funding provider – A sector body
Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Gradual introduction of technology to help delivery, including an electronic ticketing machine to better monitor passengers using concessionary passes – Events are held so that volunteers can meet each other, and email communications have been set up so that drivers can connect – Low-demand routes have been cross-subsidised by high-demand routes. This is in order to meet the social objectives of the business

This case study report provides an overview of the Tavistock Country Bus, a community transport organisation and describes the factors that are perceived to underpin its success. The findings are drawn from research commissioned by Power to Change and carried out by NatCen Social Research and WPI Economics. More information about the study and additional research reports can be found on the Power to Change website.

Overview of the Tavistock Country Bus

The Tavistock Country Bus (TCB) is a community transport organisation (CTO) set up in 1981 with a view to addressing the gap in both public and commercial transport provision in Tavistock, a rural town in West Devon. TCB's key purpose is to extend mobility and independence to those who do not have access to local public or commercial transport or a car. Although open to everyone, this tends to be older passengers (aged 65 and over) – many of whom have mobility issues and are susceptible to isolation and loneliness. TCB also aims to contribute to sustaining the town and the local economy by helping to connect local people to local retailers and services (e.g. health care services).

TCB's delivery models has four key features: (a) it is governed by a management structure consisting of a chairperson and five trustees, each assigned a distinct area of responsibility (e.g. finance, CTO regulations); (b) it is run entirely by volunteers (a workforce of 13), with trustees also contributing to driving responsibilities; (c) it has a focused delivery approach consisting of a single bus running a core service to the town centre three days a week; and (d) it also offers a supplementary service on Saturdays involving trips to outside of Tavistock for local people that are not offered regular bus services at convenient times.

TCB is a charitable organisation that offers a service that is independent from any county council. However, local authorities are an important source of financial support for TCB for two reasons: (a) they allow passengers to use their local authority Concessionary Bus Passes on TCB routes and enable TCB to reclaim fares from the use of these; and (b) local authorities have given grants in the past to help TCB purchase vehicles, although TCB also has its own strategy for raising this funding. To a lesser extent, TCB also raises revenue through passenger fares.

Success factors for Tavistock Country Bus

This section summarises the key factors that are perceived to influence the success of the TCB, based on interviews with those who are contributing to or using its services. Success factors are grouped according to whether they relate to the business, the people involved or the external environment.

Business

There are three broad business-related factors that have contributed to TCB's success: a problem solving culture in the organisation; its focused delivery model; and the quality of service it offers passengers.

Problem solving culture within organisation

A key strength of TCB is its problem-solving culture among the management committee and its volunteers, which has made TCB financially resilient and responsive to demand. A clear demonstration of this is how TCB attempts to balance its financial sustainability with meeting its social objectives. For example, although TCB has occasionally stopped servicing routes due to low demand, it has also in the past subsidised these routes through its other higher demand routes. This has enabled it to continue providing services to some of its most isolated passengers and villages.

Another example is its proactive approach to sustainability planning. Although TCB has received grant support from local authorities in the past, the management committee also has had the foresight to annually set aside a specific amount of its revenue to ensure it can afford to replace its bus in seven-year cycles without grant funding. This is also demonstrated in its financial sustainability. For example, whilst TCB has a small shortfall in 2015, there was a surplus in 2016, with grant funding making up the difference, but still comprising only 10.3% of

income. Furthermore, TCB has clearly taken steps to ensure sustainability, for example through holding enough liquid reserves to run services for around 20 weeks, thereby ensuring services are protected.

Focused delivery model

Another key feature of TCB's success story is its focused delivery model, which enables TCB to deliver a much needed service while taking account of its limited resources and the low passenger volumes that are typical of the rural market it services. An important aspect of this is having a small-scale operation that draws on assets that are fit for purpose: a single bus that is able to accommodate passengers with disabilities and to navigate the area's rural roads. TCB has also incrementally introduced specific technologies to help delivery, including an electronic ticketing machine, which enables it to accurately gauge the number of passengers using concessionary passes and so better able to receive reimbursements from the local authorities.

Quality of service for passengers

Underpinning all of the above is TCB's strong commitment to passenger service, which not only reflects its social objective but also helps to shape demand. Passenger satisfaction encourages repeat use and is a good way of attracting new passengers through 'word of mouth' recommendations. Hallmarks of TCB's approach include ensuring its drivers are friendly and helpful and that the routes it runs reflect passenger demands. TCB has sought to understand and map passenger demand through occasional surveys but also, more frequently, through drivers engaging in regular, informal conversations with passengers during the course of journeys.

People

There are three factors related to the people involved that are particularly significant to the success of TCB: its strong governance structure; the key leadership qualities of the chairperson; and the importance of volunteers.

Strong governance structure

A strength of TCB's governance structure is its collective decision-making process, which enables the workload to be distributed fairly amongst its volunteer trustees as well as playing to the skills and strengths of its leadership team. This approach is characterised by three features. Firstly, the chairperson is comfortable delegating specific responsibilities to the five trustees depending on their expertise and interests (e.g. passenger safety, finance etc.). This provides clarity in roles and responsibilities. Secondly, business decisions are decided on collectively and so the vision and direction of TCB is shared and owned by the management committee as a whole.

Finally, the management committee's decisions are grounded on actual experiences of service delivery for two reasons: (a) there is a 'flat hierarchy' in which the chairperson is approachable to discuss issues with volunteers; and (b) many of the management committee, including the chairperson, drive on the routes served by TCB and so are aware of the issues and opportunities faced by the organisation. This adaptability seems to be especially important as TCB does not regularly amend their business plans or governance structures, so effective and flexible leadership and communication is of paramount importance.

Strong leadership qualities of chairperson

Effective leadership provided by the chairperson has been instrumental in helping to drive and implement the vision provided by the management committee. The key leadership qualities identified as important include:

- The approachability of the chairperson to volunteers;
- The business experience and knowledge they bring to their role, an eye for detail, which has improved the delivery systems in place (e.g. introducing systems for TCB to monitor driver rotas); and
- Their ability to communicate a clear vision for TCB and to effectively delegate the implementation of this to others within the governance structure, within the context of each trustee being an 'expert' in their area of responsibility.

The TCB delivery model relies extensively on volunteers (particularly those aged 50 and over) to deliver its service and the qualities they bring are integral to TCB meeting its business and passenger needs. TCB itself has no full-time or part-time employees, instead relying on nine full-time volunteer drivers and four other full-time volunteers, as well as an additional four part-time volunteers. This means that whilst the business is financially sustainable, a key success factor has been the ability to attract individuals with enough time, and the right qualities, and future success will depend on this continuing.

These qualities include being able to deliver the service effectively (e.g. being confident in driving a bus with multiple passengers and knowing the local routes), being passionate about providing a passenger-oriented service (e.g. being approachable, getting to know passengers, “going the extra mile” in helping passengers use their service) but also having an understanding of the business side of their role. As mentioned, this includes routinely gauging through informal conversations with passengers which routes are in demand and which additional routes TCB could service.

Importance of volunteers

In return, TCB invests in and values its volunteers, which is important for volunteer recruitment and retention. For example, it has hosted social events that have enabled volunteers to meet one another, and it has also set up IT processes (e.g. email systems) that have helped drivers to connect and communicate with one another. In addition to making drivers feel less isolated, the IT processes have also helped in service delivery by, for example, allowing drivers to indicate if they are unable to deliver a shift and for replacement drivers to be found. However, one challenge TCB has faced has been around attracting volunteers – particularly younger volunteers that can ensure the long-term continuity of the bus service. Although not clear why, the trustees and volunteers speculate that it could be due to factors such as the time commitment involved, as well as the confidence required to drive a bus.

Community and external environment

There are three factors related to the wider community and external environment that are particularly significant to the success of TCB: the ability to meet local demand where commercial transport lacks provision; effective partnership working with local authority; and its ability to successfully navigate legislation that affects service delivery.

Meeting local demand

A key market-related strength of TCB is that it has identified and emerged from a clear need. There is a lack of suitable public and commercial transport service provision in the local area and outlying villages and TCB has responded to this lack of service in two ways: (a) it targets routes that were not serviced by the commercial bus companies and (b) it provides accessible transport for those with mobility issues by having a bus that can accommodate wheelchair users and a service that is tailored to the needs of individuals where possible (e.g. demand responsive routes). However, TCB expects the number of older people in the local area to decline and so faces the challenge of expanding its customer base to meet the unmet needs of other groups.

In response, TCB has increased its marketing campaign to raise its profile as a bus for the community as whole and to highlight the range of services it offers (e.g. journeys to places further far afield and popular with visitors, such as Torquay and Exeter) in the local area. However, they also identified that one of the barriers to success was other similar providers in the area, such as Ring and Ride and TASS (Tavistock area social services), suggesting that the needs of other groups may differ, or that TCB may not fulfil their specific needs as effectively as they do for their current users. This suggests both that a key success factor has been the ability to meet a very specific and well-defined set of needs, but also that expanding this offer may prove challenging.

Effective partnership working with local authority

As touched on earlier, TCB's partnership with the local authorities in its catchment areas has also been a significant facilitator in helping it deliver on underserved routes. Local authorities have provided direct financial support to TCB by allowing passengers to use their concessionary passes on TCB services, against which TCB could claim financial reimbursements. In addition, local authorities have also been a valuable source of advice and information for TCB in two ways: (a) they have signposted TCB to sources of funding that could be accessed to upgrade their community bus (e.g. retrofitting seatbelts) and (b) they organised events where CTOs across different areas could meet and learn from one another.

Successfully navigating legislation

Although the community transport sector is governed by strict UK and European legislation and regulation, TCB has not found it too onerous to navigate this. There are three reasons for this: (a) there are management committee members who have clear roles in dealing with specific aspects of the legislation and regulation; (b) they have learned to streamline and rationalise how they interact with regulatory bodies (e.g. presenting a batch of route change applications to the Traffic Commission in order to consolidate paperwork) and (c) they have developed relationships with regulatory organisations so that they can approach them for advice and support.

Despite TCB being able to insulate itself from most regulations, government policy does impact on the running costs of the business. In particular, TCB identified that two of their large running costs (petrol and MOT testing/compliance) could be heavily affected by government decisions in the future. In the longer-term the business environment that TCB operates in could be altered by how transport policy changes at both the local and the national level.

Financial information

The following table provides an overview of the Tavistock Country Bus's income, expenditure and assets for the period 01/11/2015 to 31/10/2016.

Income	£23,195
Expenditure	£22,790
Difference between income and expenditure	£405
Surplus/(deficit) on ordinary activities before taxation	Information unavailable
Annual income from grant or subsidy	Information unavailable
Fixed Assets	Information unavailable
Current Assets	Information unavailable
Net Assets	Information unavailable

Source: Tavistock Country Bus 2015/2016 Accounts, Charities Commission.

*Full accounts are not available, which means this information cannot be provided or calculated.