

Research summary

What works: Successful community transport

This research identifies key success factors for community transport organisations, drawing on four in-depth case studies of established community businesses in this sector. It builds on the Power to Change Research Institute's annual study of the size and shape of the community business sector in England.

Community transport organisations (CTO) are often socially motivated, delivering a valued service to the passenger, benefits for the community through promoting social cohesion, and economic value for the local community by connecting local passengers to local retailers. CTOs have a structure that replicates commercial bus companies closely, the key difference being that they provide a more passenger-oriented service to populations who may be otherwise underserved.

Key findings

The research found that there are a number of high-level success factors common across community businesses in the transport sector. These are grouped under three headings below:

Business

- **Meeting and adapting to market needs.** Successful CTOs emerge from and speak clearly to market needs. As they mature, CTOs also need to be able to adapt their business models, particularly by being open to growth and diversification. Diversification is most sustainable when it is gradual and takes into consideration the time needed to acquire partnerships and resources to deliver services.
- **Passenger-oriented business model.** Instrumental in helping CTOs generate new and repeat business.
- **Careful asset management.** Successful CTOs are able to proactively anticipate and manage the expense of vehicle stock replacement through forward planning, such as having a clear sense of the cycles in which vehicles need to be replaced, and tailoring asset acquisition to financial means (e.g. buying second-hand buses when funds are low but newer or higher quality vehicles if the funds allow).

People

- **A culture of openness to change.** In adapting to changing market needs, CTOs need to be open to change. This calls for innovation in meeting financial and social objectives (e.g. cross-subsidising low passenger volume routes with other services) and identifying opportunities in challenges (e.g. branching out to other funding sources to compensate for the loss in grant funding).

- **High quality staff and volunteers.** Drivers are pivotal to providing a safe and high-quality passenger service. Successful CTOs retain and invest in their volunteers/staff to deliver high quality service through training, through promoting a team identity to improve coordination and reduce driver isolation (e.g. through social events and formal communication channels, such as online forums), and through bringing drivers into the organisation’s decision-making processes.
- **Nurturing a range of partnerships.** To survive and expand, CTOs need to develop a range of partnerships. This includes with funders, other delivery organisations (e.g. other CTOs) and organisations able to offer support and advice (e.g. the Community Transport Association).

Community and external environment

- **Streamlining delivery on regulations.** CTOs need to identify sources of advice and support to help them navigate complex transport regulations and to develop internal processes that enable them to efficiently meet these requirements (e.g. applying for route changes in batches).
- **Community support.** In addition to generating demand, CTOs also rely on local communities as a source of volunteers and staff. This requires the community to value the services and the social objectives underpinning their work.

About the research

The report was researched and written by NatCen Social Research working with WPI Economics. The findings in this report are based on stakeholder interviews, a literature review, four in-depth case studies of successful community transport organisations and publicly available data.

The case studies are:

Community Transport Organisation	Legal form	Year established, location
Barnet Community Transport	Company limited by guarantee and registered charity	2002, London
Cuckmere Community Bus	Company limited by guarantee and registered charity	1976, East Sussex
The Friendly Transport Service	Company limited by guarantee and registered charity	1999, Shropshire
Tavistock Country Bus	Registered charity	1981, Devon

The full report can be found at www.thepowertochange.org.uk/research/research-publications/