



Cuckmere Community Bus Ltd



Location	East Sussex
Founded	1976
Legal structure	Registered charity and private company limited by guarantee without share capital
Description of services	Provision of reliable and accessible transport in the Cuckmere Valley region, particularly to those with mobility issues
Key assets	Eight 16-seater low floor minibuses
Employees	No employees
Volunteers	Around 70 part-time
Most important skill set(s) to successfully running the business	Driving skills
Biggest obstacle to success	Finding the right skills to run the business
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Local authority – High street bank – Third sector funding body – A sector body
Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The business prides itself in being professional in how drivers present themselves and how they drive, by adhering to the same safety regulations as commercial operators, and through the reliability of its timetabled services – The business has a £180,000 contingency reserve for the replacement of minibuses. It aims to buy high quality vehicles as they require lower maintenance costs in the long-term – Business growth is limited by the availability of volunteer drivers. In response, it has various recruitment activities, including local market fairs where the community can meet the drivers

This case study report provides an overview of Cuckmere Community 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 Cuckmere Community Bus

The Cuckmere Community Bus Ltd (CCB) was established in 1976 in East Sussex with the primary aim of providing reliable and accessible transport to residents in the Cuckmere Valley region who do not have access to a car. It was set up in response to the lack of commercial and public transport in the area because of low passenger volumes and, therefore, profitability. CCB serves all residents in the area but is particularly used by older passengers (aged 60 onwards), many of whom have mobility issues, to get into the local town from surrounding villages.

The steady growth in both CCB's assets and the network of routes it serves is a key part of its success story. It has expanded from a two bus operation (loaned from East Sussex County Council) running four days a week and involving eight volunteers in 1976 to a community transport organisation (CTO) that now has eight 16-seater fully accessible low floor minibuses that deliver on 25 local bus service routes seven days a week, with the help of a 70-strong volunteer workforce.

CCB's delivery model has six key features: (a) it has an ethos of not competing with commercial operators and so targets routes not served by these operators; (b) it is governed by a board comprising six members who have clear business specific roles (e.g. finance director and an operations director), some of whom also contribute directly to the delivery of the service; (c) it is entirely run by volunteers; (d) its core service is offering fixed timetable routes (under Section 22 permit of the Transport Act 1985) that take residents from neighbouring villages into town; (e) it also offers occasional transport services for events (under Section 22 permit), such as trips to local cultural and sporting events; and (f) its revenue primarily comes from passenger fares, particularly the partial reimbursements received from the local authorities in return for passengers being able to use their concessionary bus passes on routes.

Success factors for Cuckmere Community Bus

This section summarises the key factors that are perceived to influence the success of the CCB, 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 four business-related factors that underpin CCB's success: (a) a considered approach to business growth; (b) its ability to successfully balance its economic and social objectives; (c) its professional and passenger-oriented approach to service delivery; and (d) its systematic approach to asset management.

Considered approach to business growth

There were two key drivers for the business to expand: (a) an impetus to expand from a two-bus operation when it started in order to generate enough passenger numbers to allow the buses to pay for themselves; and (b) later on, an increase in demand for its services, particularly from the 1990s when commercial bus operators started to pull out of servicing local routes due to lower passenger volumes. CCB reviews and updates its business plan every six to 12 months and has adopted a considered approach towards expansion, integral to which is the need to ensure that growth is sustainable. A key feature of this considered approach is encouraging steady growth over a longer period of time, rather than over a short space of time. Moreover, CCB's governing body makes clear and careful decisions on committing to new routes and services based on its ability to deliver a reliable and high quality service. For example, it has in the past refused to service new routes which require regular late night delivery as it relies on volunteers who tend not to be available at these times.



Successfully balancing economic and social objectives

CCB's strength is also its adaptability in balancing the need to be financially viable whilst also meeting its social objective of accommodating local transport demand. For example, it has subsidised the use of buses on low volume (and revenue) routes by slightly modifying these routes so that they also cover additional villages to increase passenger numbers. Similarly, it successfully diversified its service to cater for the leisure market and other contract work (e.g. attendance of cultural and sporting events) in order to ensure bus use and revenue generation are maximised. The majority of its income is derived from fares and hire charges, but does receive a small amount of grant funding or subsidy that contributes to less than 10% of its annual income. CCB is on a strong financial footing, holding one year's worth of reserves and be able to survive without grant or subsidy.

Professional and passenger-oriented service

Providing a professional and passenger-oriented service is the cornerstone of CCB's approach as it encourages new and repeat use of the service. CCB prides itself in being professional in how drivers present themselves (e.g. in uniform), how they drive (e.g. courteously), by adhering to the same safety regulations as commercial operators and, importantly, through the reliability of its timetables services. This is coupled by the passenger-friendly nature of the service it offers, characterised by drivers being personable (e.g. interacting with passengers during journeys) and willing to help (e.g. help passengers on and off the bus), which is important given the older passenger base it serves.

Asset management

CCB has a long term view of how it manages its minibus fleet, which ensures they are replaced in a timely fashion and that they are able to operate for longer. This approach involves planning for the replacement of the whole fleet of minibuses approximately every 12 years (i.e. one bus every 18 months or so on average) and replacing these with high quality buses which, though costing more, will incur lower maintenance costs over the long term.

People

Key to the success of CCB is having enough committed volunteers to run the service and a board that have clear roles and responsibilities who work closely with volunteers.

Sufficient level of committed volunteers

Volunteers are a vital part of the success story for CCB for two reasons: (a) they enable it to cost effectively deliver on routes that commercial operators cannot serve due to low passenger volumes and (b) they are at the centre of the passenger-focused service through their commitment to delivering a reliable and helpful service (discussed above). The majority of volunteers are drivers, with others undertaking administrative tasks or sitting on the Stakeholder Advisory Board.

CCB works closely with its volunteers so that they feel supported in delivering services and are part of a team. It does this through various ways, including: an effective induction process (e.g. drivers receiving the necessary safety training and being able to shadow existing drivers to understand routes and pick up on the passenger service culture), an online forum where drivers can contact one another with route queries and requests for cover, a voice in the decision making process through driver-led meetings attended by board members that take place every three months, and social events where drivers can meet one another (e.g. its annual Christmas party). Given the importance of volunteers, a key limitation to the growth of CCB is the availability of volunteer drivers, who tend to be older (aged 50 and over). In response, CCB engages in various recruitment drives such as advertising volunteer vacancies on its buses and attending local market fairs, giving members of the public and opportunity to meet drivers and even take the bus for a drive under supervision.

The availability of driving volunteers is not a new problem, and has been a challenge since CCB was established. More broadly, CCB ranks "volunteers having insufficient time" as being the biggest obstacle to growing the business, ahead of both "finding the right skills to run the business" and ahead of "regulation restricting business activity". Skills that CCB say are most important to running and growing it as a business are the ability to drive, knowledge of regulations and financial management expertise.

Organised board who have close working relationship with volunteers

The importance of working as a team is also an integral feature of the way the governing board operates in two ways: (a) it is comprised of five individuals and a chair person, who all have clear roles but who collectively

make decisions; and (b) there is a “short chain of command” in which board members are accessible to volunteers and some of the board members also deliver on routes so are cognisant of the issues facing drivers.

Community and external environment

Important to success has been CCB’s ability to clearly identify transport needs in the local area; successfully navigating legislation that affects the delivery of the service; and its ability to collect feedback from the community, which is used to respond to the needs of local people.

Meeting local demand

Since its inception, CCB’s key strength has been to be able to recognise and speak to a clear transport need in the area. Indeed, the impetus for CCB came initially from the local Women’s Institute, who raised the issue of a poor local transport with the East Sussex Country Council in the early 1970s. CCB has a strong understanding of its niche market: it does not want to compete with commercial companies out of an ethos of fairness, not wishing to provide unfair competition because of its low cost volunteer delivery model, and because it lacks the capacity to run the frequency of services that commercial competitors can. Within this context, CCB successfully found a niche for itself by operating a small scale operation in underserved areas involving single decker buses that are fit for purpose. That is, buses that are able to navigate the narrow country lanes can accommodate the disability needs for the older population (e.g. having ramps).

Successfully navigating legislation

The legislation and regulations that govern the community transport sector have largely not been an issue for CCB because it has rationalised the process of navigating these. For example, CCB plans route changes in advance and applies early to the Traffic Commission in order to ensure delays in approval are avoided. However, CCB has experienced two particular challenges: (a) licencing regulations that require drivers who have received their licence after 1997 to take an additional test before they are able to drive a minibus. CCB cannot afford to fund volunteers to complete this and so this limits their ability to recruit younger volunteers; and (b) the higher insurance costs for those over 75, which affects the retention of older volunteers.

Community buy-in

Community buy-in is an important factor in the success of CCB as it is a service geared towards connecting the local community. In particular, community feedback (e.g. through stakeholder meetings CCB hosts four times a year) enables CCB to understand and respond to the transport needs of the local community. To a lesser extent, CCB also benefits from the donations and funds raised by the local community.

Financial information

The following table provides an overview of The Cuckmere Community Bus’s income, expenditure and assets for the period 01/01/2015 to 31/12/2015.

Income	£228,775
Expenditure	£221,502
Difference between income and expenditure	£7,272
Surplus/(deficit) on ordinary activities before taxation*	–
Annual income from grant or subsidy	£1,410
Fixed Assets	£278,354.25
Current Assets	
Accounts Receivable	£2,817.38
VAT Receivable	£23,292.49
Prepaid Expenses	£7,171.00
Hire purchase interest for future write-off	£15,264.29
Cash in Hand and at Bank	£118,105.20
Total	£166,650.36
Net Assets	£210,562.89

Source: Cuckmere Community Bus Ltd 2015 Accounts, Charities Commission.

*Information not included in a relevant form in this budget.

**Calculated as the sum of the Wealden District Council Grant and the New Year’s Day Grants from Polegate TC. This likely underestimates a number of other revenue sources such as partnerships.