

Community Links

A door to door service for all residents 'stuck for transport'



A transport service that has become a 'travel lifeline' for many people living within Stratford-on-Avon District

“*An improved ability to shop is perhaps not the most obvious benefit in terms of people's social welfare, but being able to easily access a supermarket for food and other general supplies is one of the things most people tend to take for granted. Without a car, however, this is often not such an easy task, especially with small children in tow or if you have a mobility impairment, or simply if you have to carry a lot of heavy bags home from the bus stop. Apart from the work journey, shopping trips are the most regular journeys that most people make and, for this reason, good transport to and from shops that offer a range of affordable goods and services can be an important indicator of social inclusion.*”

Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2008

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Background

Some five years ago, following extensive discussions between officers from Stratford District Council, Warwickshire County Council and the CVS (now known as VASA), agreement was reached to provide a new community transport service across the district in a partnership venture. A service level agreement was established between SDC and WCC and the organisations in turn agreed contracts with VASA and private transport operators respectively. Capital monies were provided to purchase four suitable vehicles which were adapted to meet the accessibility needs of disabled and older less ambulant passengers. Two part-time co-ordinators were employed by VASA to operate the passenger booking system and a Management Group, comprising representatives of all partner agencies plus transport operators, was established.

Aims of the Service

The 'door to door' transport service was designed to meet the needs of residents of any age, wherever they may live within the district, who were 'stuck for transport' to get to local destinations on weekdays, between about 9.15pm and 2.30pm. These operating hours enabled the vehicles to be used to provide school transport contracts outside these times.

To qualify for the transport service passengers would need to have:

- A genuine need for local transport and
 - Cannot access public transport because of mobility problems or other issues
- or
- Live in an isolated location with no other form of transport available to them.

A simple registration form was provided for residents to initially register with the scheme and to provide outline details of any presenting access difficulties. Initially the charge for this transport was £1.00 per single journey; £2.00 return, regardless of the length of the journey.

The transport service could be used for a wide range of individual travel needs, such as visiting friends, attending social or support groups, leisure activities, lifelong learning and shopping. It would not be used for mainstream health appointments, for which residents would be directed to the volunteer car scheme operated by VASA.

The district was divided into three sections, west, east and south and transport was provided on three days per week in each area.

Service Developments

Since its inception there have been a number of significant changes and developments made to the service provision and these include:

- An agreement with the Stratford Town Trust to provide funding for a three year period commenced late 2007. This grant was to fund an additional vehicle that was to be used exclusively to transport residents who meet the service criteria and live within the specified town boundaries. The service was available Mon-Fri each week.
- A decision was taken during 2008 to increase the fares from £2.00 to £2.60 for a return journey. This has been the only fare increase to date in order that it is as affordable to as many people as possible. *NB A further fare increase was applied from 3rd October 2011 to £3.00 return.*
- Due to increasing demand for the Community Links service, an extended service was introduced in November 2010. This resulted in a five day provision on Monday to Friday in each of the three areas and the five day service was also maintained for Stratford town residents. The extension to operating days has provided a more flexible service for passengers and has resulted in an increase in passenger journeys.

“Community Links is wonderful and more than a blessing to disabled people and their carers. Our heartfelt thanks and gratitude to all concerned.”



Community Links

“I feel I must say ‘thank you’ to you all for all your kindness, courtesy and efficiency. I think it is a terrific service and it is making quite a positive difference to my life.”

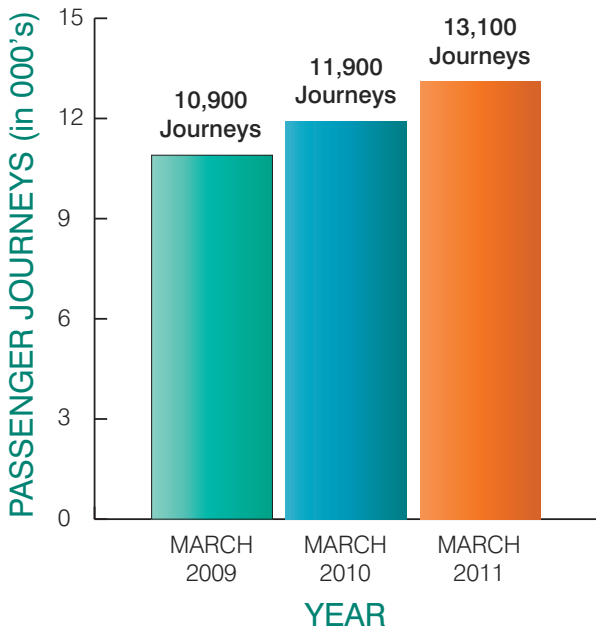
Monitoring and Feedback

The Management Group has overseen the monitoring and evaluation of the transport service since 2006 and has used this information to help shape and improve the service wherever possible.

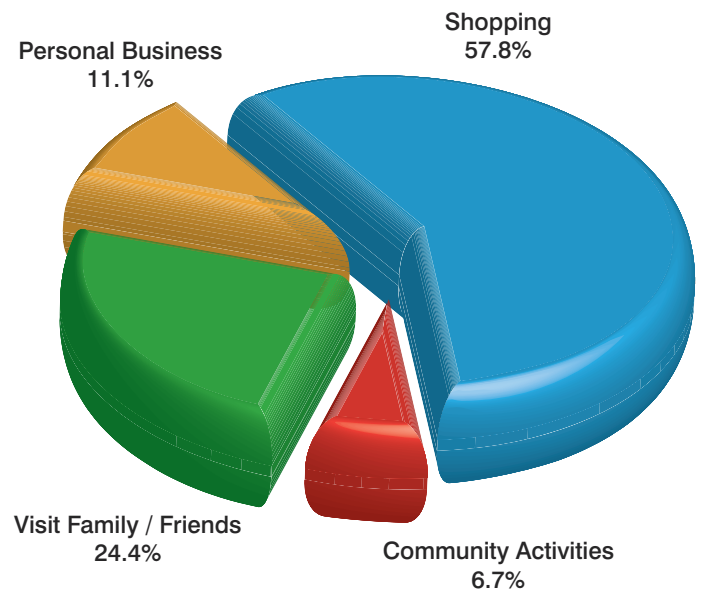
On registration, new customers are provided with ‘Compliments and Complaints’ cards to encourage them to make comment upon the service whether this is positive or negative. Unless these are issued anonymously, the comments will always be followed up with the passenger.

On an annual basis, a detailed questionnaire has been issued to all passengers that are registered with the scheme and the resulting returns have been professionally collated and analysed. In 2010 and 2011, there was a 97% satisfaction level achieved by those who responded to the questionnaire- that is 97% stated that they were either very or fairly satisfied with the service. Critical points have always been discussed and addressed where possible.

Passenger Journeys Per Annum



Main Reason for the use of Community Links 2010



Working Together

The Community Links transport service has never been viewed in isolation and there has been, and continues to be, liaison with other local community transport services, such as Back & 4th, Shipston Link and the Volunteer Car scheme managed by VASA. Passengers are provided with information and are encouraged to utilise other services where they may better meet their individual needs. More recently informal discussions have been held with community transport personnel from Worcestershire County Council and Warwick District Council.



The Value of Community Links Transport- Three Case Studies

Case Study 1

Mrs B, aged 50, is a non-driver and lives in Henley-in-Arden and is a full time carer for her mother who has been wheelchair bound since about 1997, as a result of a stroke. They have both been using the service for about two years and as Mrs B is a carer she is able to travel for free, which is of great benefit to the family. It is invaluable that the vehicle is able to take wheelchairs. The transport service enables her mother to do her shopping at the supermarket, which helps to maintain independence and enhance the quality of her life.

Case Study 2

Mrs A, aged 81 currently lives in a sheltered housing complex, which is near to her son and daughter who, though supportive, work full time and can only provide help at the weekend. She reluctantly gave up driving at the age of 75 due to deteriorating health. Mrs A is delighted to be able to use the service to go to the hairdressers on a weekly basis and is able to afford the £2.60 return fare on Community Links, rather than the taxi fare of £9.00. The service enables her to remain independent and to have the freedom to go out during the week, without having to trouble her family.

Case Study 3

Mrs D, aged 56, has multiple sclerosis and unfortunately recent life experiences have caused her a good deal of stress which has exacerbated her condition and she now walks with sticks. The service was recommended to her by a friend and she found the registration process simple and user-friendly. She now uses the service to attend a gym, where she is able to perform a gentle exercise routine that aids her mobility. She is also able to visit a friend in a nearby town, which she would be unable to afford if she had to travel by taxi.

“This is a marvellous service. It enables my elderly disabled father to visit us independently, giving him not only independence, but the opportunity to be out in, and part of, the community.”

Why Support Community Links?

- 5 years proven effective operation of the service
- Documented evidence of the value of the service to the current passengers by annual feedback questionnaires and telephone discussions..
- Incremental increase in the number of passenger journeys per annum, which currently stands at over 13,000.
- Providing support to the more 'vulnerable' and socially excluded residents.
- Highly regarded service across the District and supported by the recent 'Simalto' consultation carried out by the District Council.
- Installation of new software to radically improve the booking requirements from 3 days to 1 day in advance and a Monday to Friday service in all areas.
- Potential to work with other neighbouring authorities on shared community transport initiatives, with the opportunity to reduce operational costs.
- General recognition of the importance of retaining community transport services, particularly in the rural and semi-rural areas of the district where public transport may have been reduced.
- Improves the local economy by transporting additional customers into the main centres for shopping and business reasons.

