

Story 7

Five villages Community Car Scheme

Tackling social isolation in rural areas, improving health & access to healthcare



The Five Village Car Scheme is a volunteer transport service. Volunteers use their own vehicles to transport members to and from a wide range of appointments, from shopping and recreation, to healthcare. Members book through a central administrator, and volunteers are paid mileage and usage expenses. The scheme grew out of a survey that Norfolk RCC conducted in 2010 in rural Great Yarmouth, which demonstrated that people were experiencing problems in accessing hospitals and other services.

In addition, certain members of the Parish Council in Belton identified a problem: they were ferrying elderly relatives around and felt sure that there must be other older people in need of transport.

The Doctor's Surgery in Belton closed in 2011, necessitating all residents to register with the practice in Bradwell, which has made it more difficult for people in Belton to access health care.

Life in rural communities is changing, most notably in terms of cuts in public transport and people living longer with more complex health issues who often have no family around to support them.

Why is it needed?

The Scheme covers three parishes with a total population of 6,195. Within that total the following figures are notable:

- Households without a car: 245 (4% of households)
- People with limiting long term illness: 1,270 (20.5% of population)
- People aged over 80: 230 (3.7% of population)

Government projections indicate that over the next 20 years the number of people in Norfolk aged over 65 will increase by 57% and that the number of people aged over 85 will rise by 87%, which will heavily impact on the need for this Project. It is also anticipated that 29% of all those aged over 65 years will have some level of care need.

The ambition:

The ambition was to improve the lives of people by enabling them access to affordable and flexible transport to local doctors' surgeries, dentists, opticians, hospital and social appointments.

The Scheme covers five geographical areas: Belton with Browston, Burgh Castle and Fritton and St Olaves.

WSP

What happened?

Background research

Norfolk RCC received some funding from Great Yarmouth Borough Council between 2010 and 2011 to identify barriers to people accessing services across the rural parishes. A large scale survey was undertaken which highlighted transport and the lack of it as a major issue. The overriding majority of comments (232) stated in the feedback were made regarding either current public transport provision and 90 respondents stated that they would be interested in community transport schemes. Together, Norfolk RCC and Belton with Browston Parish Council launched the Car Scheme in March 2011.



Making progress

Norfolk RCC assisted with practical aspects of the start-up: designed a selection of three logos, made the ID badges for the drivers, undertook the CRB checks and has provided intensive development support for the past two years.

The Project took a long time to get off the ground and despite the evidence for its need, people were slow in taking it up.

The Committee had several meetings where they considered closing it down due to lack of support. After a particularly difficult meeting Jenny Sawyer, the Administrator of the Scheme, sent an e-mail: 'It was good to see you last night, nice to have a calmer influence present!!!! Thank you for your excellent advice and support.'

Surveying village communities

Over May and June 2010, 15,000 surveys were distributed across the 21 rural parishes of Gt Yarmouth (except Caister and Bradwell). A total of 767 surveys were completed giving an average response rate of 5.1%. We used the information from the survey to start a dialogue with all the parish councils, responding directly to all enquiries and interested parties. Belton with Browston Parish Council were particularly interested in developing a local scheme and became the first parish council we worked with.

Beneficiaries and partners

The Scheme is run as a sub-committee of Belton with Browston Parish Council. All of the parish councils in the coverage area make a small financial contribution which pays for the mobile phone. The volunteer drivers are invited to join the Management Committee that runs the Scheme. **In October 2013 the Scheme received the highest number of requests to date for lifts: 43.**



Combining local assets

- Nearly a quarter of the population (23.4%) in the target area is aged between 60 and 74, offering a significant pool from which to draw potential volunteers, as many are likely to be retired and to own a car
- A small core of willing volunteers had come forward
- Norfolk RCC's knowledge of car schemes and development officer time
- GYBC knowledge of County initiatives to develop car schemes and additional support.



Challenges and solutions

The Committee viewed itself as a small group of friends wanting to do some good. It took a long time to persuade the Committee that they needed a constitution, policies and public liability insurance.

Although the Group has been reluctant to attend wider networking events, they have been keen to work with the Norfolk RCC Development Officer. At the start of the process the Development Officer attended every meeting and introduced a simple draft constitution.

There was a lot of resistance to it and threats to leave the Committee so the constitution was outvoted. Because they refused to comply with the Development Officer's advice, she sent a letter to the Committee laying out the potential consequences and benefits of being properly constituted.

This seemed to have an effect because when the Development Officer returned the Constitution was discussed again in terms of not being extra work but protection and structure and it was finally adopted. A similar discussion took place about the need to buy separate insurance and it was decided that the Committee would operate under the wing of the Parish Council and benefit from their insurance.

Outcomes

- Improved **social inclusion /wellbeing** due to better support
- **Improved health** due to access to hospital/doctor appointments
- **Reduced need for crisis intervention**
- **Reduced sense of isolation** due to access to volunteers
- **Enhanced level of independence** for older people
- **Enhanced confidence** and sense of well-being of the volunteer drivers.

Justifying the project

On the positive side, it is a flexible and responsive service that is focused around actual individual's travel requirements.

In addition to transport, the Scheme offers wider support such as befriending and caring: the drivers take blind people shopping and to the bank, wait with people at the hospital, return to the chemist several times until a patient's drugs are ready to collect, have cups of tea and listen to problems. **The Chair said that the drivers are 'social workers' and that 'You can tell what they think of the service when they throw their arms around you in tears after you have waited with them at the hospital.'**

The group is largely self-sufficient and no longer relies on RCC support, but are reluctant to develop the Scheme further.

On the negative side, it is reliant on a small group of individuals who are Committee members as well as drivers.

Also the service only operates during office hours in the week and people have to ring in advance to book so that the volunteers can plan ahead therefore it is not as responsive as some people would like.

What's it worth?

The impact on an elderly person living in isolation can include depression, not eating properly, calling emergency GPs, visiting A & E and mental deterioration. The need for crisis intervention is avoided through the Project leading to:

- Improved take-up of hospital, GP, dentist appointments
- Reduction in home visits
- Supported independent living
- Closer relationship between parish council and residents and better understanding of issues.

Cost savings

- The service is free whereas Age UK employs Carers/Support Givers at £6.41 to £6.46 per hour
- Income maximisation: if the users weren't paying 45p per mile they would be paying taxi prices
- Early identification of additional problems such as increased visits to A&E
- Community Development Worker support hours: 50.

Next steps

Extra support

At Norfolk RCC's encouragement, the Car Scheme joined the newly formed Community Transport Association (CTA), which offers additional support and help free of charge. The CTA formed soon after the Belton group were established and was set up as part of a Norfolk RCC initiative.

New opportunities

One of the trustees from the Belton Car Scheme came to an event Norfolk RCC held at Gressenhall Rural Museum, called Norfolk Conversations. The volunteer came as a peer mentor and will join our developing Peer Support Network.

Connecting people

In an attempt to interlink everything, Norfolk RCC is considering a wider support group to include other volunteers working in a similar capacity. We could use the car scheme to promote other things and this year we plan to promote the Warm and Well Scheme through the drivers.

Building capacity

We will also offer to support the drivers through our Good Neighbours Support Network. This would provide an opportunity for groups to request extra training and information and help us to identify any needs that have arisen and as yet are unmet.

Reflections:

The main challenge is to recruit and retain a pool of volunteers. At present there are only six regular drivers, all of whom are married couples and share a car, which means there are only three available cars. Because they are retired and have expendable income, some of the volunteers take extended holidays and so are unavailable for extended periods. On occasions they have to turn people away as a driver is not available.

Key Learning

Norfolk RCC helped to set up another community car scheme in Rollesby based on the success of this model. Unfortunately the Rollesby scheme failed to develop and it closed after a year due to lack of volunteers and the belief that it wasn't needed! This case highlights the need for sustained and concentrated support for volunteers as well as a recognition that projects such as these are slow burn, long term projects and Rollesby did not give it a chance to grow.

One of the outcomes is that it highlights the difficulty of managing a volunteer scheme in the community.