

Borders' hub for community transport


**Smarter Choices,
Smarter Places**
Supporting Sustainable Travel

Summary

Local authority:
Scottish Borders Council



Residents of the Scottish Borders who are unable to use public transport or do not have access to a car can access community transport services. However, historically, accessing community transport services involved booking journeys with one of many service providers as a single booking point was not available. This lack of coordination created inefficiencies, such as journey duplication, and made it more difficult to arrange shared journeys.

In response, the Scottish Borders Strategic Transport Board identified a need to create a one stop approach to community transport, and by September 2015, the Borders Community Transport Hub had been established with funding support from the Smarter Choices, Smarter Places (SCSP) programme. More recently, the Hub was rebranded and is now called the Flow Centre.

The Flow Centre was initially staffed and managed by two part-time operators employed by the British Red Cross. From April 2018, operation of the initiative passed to the Berwickshire Association for Voluntary Service, which continues to deliver the associated services.

Staff coordinate and make bookings on behalf of the operators. The Scottish Borders Council has given strong support for the project, and six transport organisations, including four community transport operators, the Royal Voluntary Service's community/ voluntary car scheme and the Red Cross Cancer Cars service, provide the associated transport services.

Hub services have proven to be both popular and successful. They have helped to reduce the number of duplicate journeys, facilitate journey sharing, improve service quality and reduce the number of people who fail to attend appointments. Importantly, they have also helped users to participate more fully in their communities.

This project received funding through the *Smarter Choices, Smarter Places* programme, which is administered by Paths for All and funded by Transport Scotland.



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Historically, older and disabled residents in the Borders requiring transport were provided with contact numbers for a number of local community transport (CT) providers. This led to inefficiencies, such as journey duplication and may have deterred potential users from booking journeys. This led the Scottish Borders Community Planning Partnership to identify a need to develop a new, partnership-based, demand-responsive approach to community transport provision to help reduce the number of vehicles used, increase the number of shared journeys and increase the number of service users.

From 2015/16 to 2017/18, the Scottish Borders Council was awarded SCSP funding to establish a 'one-stop' approach to community transport provision. During 2018/19, core funding was sourced entirely from the Integrated Care Fund via the local Health and Social Care Partnership. At the time of writing, funding for the 2019/20 period was still subject to confirmation.

Alongside core funding, a small charge is levied by the CT operators, who can also access the Bus Service Operators Grant. Taken together, these two funding streams typically cover a majority of operational costs associated with fuel and vehicle maintenance.

The initial delivery of the service was led by the British Red Cross and by September 2015, it had set up and staffed the Borders Community Transport Services Hub.

Two national CT operators and four local Wheels projects agreed to support the project by providing community transport services to people making bookings via the Hub.

Over time, it has become apparent that smaller, more local CT operators tend to be more flexible than their national counterparts. For example, unlike local operators, national partners already have software and systems that are not necessarily compatible with those used by the Flow Centre. Therefore, a key lesson to emerge from operating the Flow Centre is that more locally rooted partners may be able to offer more bespoke support than their national counterparts.

From April 2018, operation of the initiative passed from the British Red Cross to the Berwickshire Association for Voluntary Service (BAVS) and a rebranding process means the Hub is now called the Flow Centre.

The Flow Centre operates from 9am - 4pm Monday to Friday, including Bank Holidays, thereby offering a single contact point, and one with longer opening hours than most individual operators can provide. It is staffed by two part-time operators.

Service users can call a free phone number to book community transport and trip-share journeys. Centre staff use a web-based booking system (called Flexi-route), which enables participating community transport providers to either schedule or decline booking requests that are entered by staff. They also use a web service to book trip-share journeys for users who are unable to do so because they do not have internet access.

Promotion of the service targets clients of health centres, community centres and hospitals throughout the Borders. Communication channels include leaflets, posters, word of mouth and social media activity. In addition, statutory service providers such as the Scottish Ambulance Service and some local NHS services also refer people to the Centre. Alongside this, the Centre's promotional activities are used to help recruit more volunteers.

The Flow Centre has built successful working relationships with some hospital departments and health centres. These have led to a more coordinated approach between patient appointments and transport provision, thereby reducing the number of older and disabled people who fail to attend their appointments. Despite these successes, BAVS has found it challenging to successfully engage NHS Borders at a strategic level.

Participating community transport providers can clearly see the benefit of their involvement in the BAVS scheme. For instance, in 2016, one provider recognised that the Flow Centre's extended operating hours enabled them to provide a better customer service. As a result, from October 2016, all existing clients were required to book their transport requirements using Flow Centre services. This saves staff time and provides clients with a better contact experience. Since then, other providers have echoed these sentiments.

Over time, the Flow Centre has seen a growth in the number and diversity of requests it receives. Although the Flow Centre cannot currently support requests outwith its target market (i.e. older and disabled people), there may be potential to expand into new markets in the future.

There is now 'in principle' agreement between the partners to move towards an integrated entity that will enable the Flow Centre to diversify the range of services it offers and become more financially resilient. Whilst a merger of this nature is likely to be challenging, it is evident that the longer-term sustainability and growth of the operation requires new, shared systems of governance, management and operation.

“ For older and more vulnerable people in the Borders, the Community Hub has become an invaluable service we could not do without. People who use the service tell me having one number to phone to reach all the providers is so much easier. For the providers, they know we are maximising the use of all our transport and that means we are more efficient. ”

Helen Forsyth Chair,
Scottish Borders Strategic
Transport Board

¹ Red Cross services are only provided to cancer patients

In numbers

26,417

journeys were provided by the service in the year to 28/02/19, a 24% increase on 2017/18 figures for the previous comparable year

149

more shared journeys were provided over this period than for the previous year

2

national transport service providers and 4 local Wheels projects work in partnership with the Council and the to deliver the Flow Centre services ¹

296

new clients previously not known to any of the providers registered with the Flow Centre in the same period

60

volunteer drivers supported The Flow Centre

£65,000

was the The Flow Centre budget in 2018/19

“ I couldn't praise your service more highly! It means that if necessary I need heart treatment and my family are unavailable - I don't need to panic! ”

Service user

“ I use this service as it is excellent in providing myself with transport to the place I need to visit. I used to drive but had to stop as I had a mini stroke which affected my eyes. I also suffer from Brittle bones. (So, this is a brilliant service). ”

Service user

“ Having a transport service that operates via a single telephone number is a real step forward. It makes the process of arranging and accessing transport much simpler for the service user. The Hub is a good example of collaboration between several different agencies. ”

Timothy Stephenson, Passenger Transport Manager, Scottish Borders Council

