



# **Mendip Central**

Community Cars Partnership

## **Progress Report**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This progress report provides an update on the Mendip Central Community Car Scheme Partnership (Shepton Local Community Network), formed to improve access to health appointments and essential activities for residents across Shepton Mallet and surrounding parishes.

- Partners agreed a parish-based rollout approach (first meeting: 14 October 2025), drawing on learning from established schemes including Frome Community Drivers and West Somerset partnerships.
- Primary drivers of demand include reduced bus services and relocation of key services, increasing barriers for vulnerable residents and young people.
- Operating model is expected to be volunteer-led initially, with the option to transition to a Community Interest Company if paid coordination is required for sustainability.
- Priority operational requirements include DBS checks, insurance and safeguarding guidance, clear governance, and a scalable booking/administration solution; reducing reliance on cash payments remains a key consideration.
- Main risks are volunteer recruitment/retention and selecting affordable systems that can be shared or scaled across parishes.
- The £5,000 grant is held by Shepton Mallet Town Council and the delivery timeline has been extended; next steps are to confirm eligible spend, assess needs and volunteer capacity by parish, strengthen engagement with parishes and GP practices, and develop standardised information and promotional materials.

## Background

### Grant Funding

Laura Miller, Connect Somerset Champion and Community Development Officer at Shepton Mallet Town Council Community, successfully bid for £5,000 of Somerset Community Foundation grant with the following purpose: for a Community Volunteer Transport Programme to provide transportation services for individuals in need, such as elderly, disabled, and low-income residents, who face barriers to accessing essential services, as well as a service to transport children across the town in exceptional circumstances to school, not a regular service, with the Town Council to support the first year activities of planning and recruiting with a view to handing it over to a self managing team but keeping an oversight.

Several local models were considered, such as Wiveliscombe, which is fully grant funded and is run as part of the paid community team role, and Fromem which charges a small fee each journey which funds the project.

Following a number of surveys and focus groups to understand transportation needs in the community, mapping key locations such as medical centres, community hubs, schools and identify vulnerable groups requiring transport services, this project was brought to the attention of the Shepton Local Community Network (LCN) to establish a steering group.

Nataliya Wills, the Shepton LCN Link Officer presented the project to the LCN stakeholders, and following the initial discussions, community transport was adopted as one of the priorities for the LCN.

Subsequent meetings were held, and while some delays were experienced due to changes in circumstances, steady progress continued to be maintained through regular updates and discussions.

## 1. Launch

### 1.1. First official meeting was held on 14 October 2025

Representatives from Shepton Mallet Town Council and the following parish councils: Pilton, Coleford, Croscombe, Evercreech, Doultling; Somerset Bus Partnership, Spark Somerset, Mendip Country Practice, Frome Community Drivers, Health Connections, Thrive, Spark Somerset; Connect Somerset Champion and Local Community Network Link Officer.

Morag introduced the Frome Community Drivers scheme and demonstrated the Road XS software use in practice.



## 1.2. Main Themes and Discussion Points

### a. Transport Challenges

- Significant barriers exist for vulnerable people and young people in accessing appointments and activities due to limited transport options.
- Local bus cuts and relocation of medical practices have exacerbated access issues.

### b. Community Car Schemes: Structure and Funding

- Frome Community Drivers scheme evolved from a charity model at Active and In Touch to a Community Interest Company (CIC) to ensure sustainability.
- Funding is primarily self-generated through journey fees (e.g., £6 admin fee plus mileage), with some external support from organisations and local trusts.
- The importance of maintaining a minimum number of journeys per month (e.g., 200) for financial viability was emphasised.

### c. Volunteer Recruitment and Management

- Recruiting and retaining volunteer drivers is the biggest challenge.
- Volunteers are reimbursed for mileage (e.g., 55p per mile) and must be DBS checked.
- Volunteer fatigue and the need for a supportive community were discussed.

### d. Booking and Payment Systems

- Transition from manual spreadsheets to specialised booking software (e.g., Road XS) improves efficiency.
- Software costs are significant; sharing licenses across schemes was suggested.
- Payment for the journeys is mostly cash, but there is a need to explore digital payment solutions due to declining cash usage.

### e. Collaboration and Expansion

- Various existing schemes were discussed – potential for merging schemes or sharing resources to improve efficiency and coverage.
- Coordination with town and parish councils and Somerset Council for support, resources, and compliance.
- Awareness campaigns and presentations to local groups are key for volunteer recruitment, such as the WI, Rotary, Lions Club, Patient Participation Groups.

### f. Operational Issues

- Flexibility in journey distance and timing depends on volunteer availability.
- Parking and additional costs (e.g., congestion charges) are typically covered by passengers.
- Management committees are needed to oversee operations and compliance.



### **g. Legal and Structural Considerations**

- Options for legal structure include CICs or incorporated community groups, each with different implications for funding and regulation.
- CICs require registration, accounting, and a board of directors, but offer flexibility and access to some grants.

## **2. Launch strategy**

### **a. Recruit Volunteer Drivers**

- Target local organisations and community groups for recruitment.
- Use presentations and awareness campaigns to reach potential volunteers.

### **b. Establish or Strengthen Management Group**

- Form a management committee to oversee operations and compliance.
- Seek support from local councils for financial oversight.

### **c. Optimise Booking and Payment Systems**

- Continue using or expand access to booking software.
- Explore digital payment solutions to reduce reliance on cash.

### **d. Engage with Local Authorities and Partners**

- Maintain strong relationships with Somerset County Council and other stakeholders for funding and resources.
- Leverage available toolkits and support.

### **e. Promote the Scheme**

- Increase awareness among residents, GPs, and community organisations.
- Distribute flyers and information in medical practices, libraries, and community spaces.

### **f. Plan for Sustainability**

- Monitor volunteer numbers and journey volumes.
- Seek additional funding or grants as needed (e.g., National Lottery “Awards for All”).

### **g. Clarify Legal Structure**

- Decide on the most suitable legal structure (CIC or community group).
- Ensure compliance with relevant regulations and reporting requirements.

## **3. Challenges and adjustments**

The primary challenges encountered:



- creating a suitable structure for the group with questions around governance and initial steps required to launch a community transport initiative across Shepton Mallet and neighbouring parishes
- exploring different operational models for the car scheme, including volunteer-only structures, paid coordinators, and the potential transition to a CIC to enable employment and manage liabilities
- options for booking and administrative software, including leveraging existing systems developed by neighbouring partnerships to streamline operations and reduce costs
- explored the benefits of standardising administrative processes, insurance, and branding for community car schemes, and discussed the potential for future central coordination
- addressing the transport needs of different community groups, such as children, older people, and those in rural areas, and discussed strategies for ensuring inclusivity and effective service delivery.
- time required for learning from established car schemes in West Somerset and neighbouring areas, proposing regular meetings and information exchange to support the new partnership's development
- ongoing efforts to engage young people in Shepton and surrounding villages, including youth councils and research projects to identify gaps in provision and inform future service development

### 3.1 Establishment of Mendip Central Community Car Scheme Partnership:

- **Partnership Structure and Governance:** The group agreed to establish the Mendip Central Community Car Scheme Partnership under the Local Community Network (LCN) umbrella, allowing for shared resources, meeting spaces, and administrative support. The partnership would initially operate as a collaborative forum, with the potential to transition into a Community Interest Company (CIC) if required for future funding or paid roles.
- **Naming and Area Coverage:** Participants debated various names to ensure clarity and inclusivity, ultimately settling on 'Mendip Central Community Car Scheme Partnership' to reflect the central area and avoid confusion with existing transport groups. The scheme will cover Shepton Mallet and several surrounding parishes, with flexibility to adapt as more communities join.



- **Role of Parishes and Volunteer Recruitment:** Each parish is encouraged to recruit its own volunteer drivers and coordinators, with the partnership providing support, best practice sharing, and a central forum for advice and updates. The group recognised the need for at least five volunteer drivers per parish to ensure adequate coverage, with flexibility based on local demand.

### 3.2 Operational Models and Funding Considerations:

- **Volunteer Versus Paid Coordinator Models:** The group compared models where all roles are voluntary with those employing a paid coordinator, noting that most car schemes in the region are volunteer-run but that a paid coordinator could provide reliability and accountability. The Frome model, which began as a volunteer scheme and evolved into a CIC with a paid coordinator, was highlighted as a successful local example. Paying a coordinator would require an organisational structure, such as a CIC, to handle payroll and compliance. Most small schemes rely on volunteer coordinators, but larger or more complex schemes may need to employ someone, which would require additional funding and administrative setup.
- **CIC and Umbrella Structures:** Participants discussed the legal and financial implications of paying staff, concluding that a CIC structure would be necessary for employing a coordinator. Alternatively, the town council could host the role, as seen in other schemes, but this would require council agreement and ongoing support.
- **Driver Background Checks:** DBS checks are encouraged and provided free by Somerset Council for community car scheme volunteer drivers, with business support handling the process. A generic email address is used for submissions to ensure continuity.
- **Insurance and Liability Management:** Car schemes operate under specific car sharing legislation, so taxi licensing is not required, and as long as HMRC mileage rates are followed, there is no tax liability for drivers. The group clarified that volunteer drivers would need to inform their car insurers about their voluntary work, with most insurers not charging extra. The scheme itself would take out public liability insurance to cover all drivers, and the partnership would provide guidance on insurance and safeguarding requirements.
- **Accessibility and Special Needs:** In terms of provision for wheelchair users, it was concluded that most car schemes cannot accommodate wheelchairs unless they have access to a suitable vehicle, as seen in Watchet and West Somerset, where accessible electric vehicles are shared among schemes. At this time, the



group may be unable to look to provide such services. However, depending on the uptake and delivery, this will be explored again in the future.

- **Relationship with Taxis and Community Transport:** The group acknowledged there may be challenges with taxi operators but are satisfied that car schemes are legal, fill unmet demand, and are not in direct competition with larger providers like Mendip Community Transport.
- **Parish Engagement and Funding:** While all parishes were invited to participate, only a subset have engaged so far. The group agreed to focus on active parishes initially, with the possibility of others joining once the scheme demonstrates success. Funding for essentials such as phones, software, and insurance will be managed at the partnership level, with parishes contributing as needed.

### 3.3 Software Solutions and Administrative Tools:

- **Existing Software Solutions:** The West Somerset Car Scheme Partnership has developed a simple software tool for managing bookings and claims, which integrates with council concessionary fare schemes. Nicholas Markson offered to discuss with the software's developers about extending its use to the Mendip Central partnership, potentially saving significant costs compared to commercial providers.
- **Decision on Unified Versus Parish-Specific Tools:** The group acknowledged the need to decide whether to adopt a single software solution for all parishes or allow each to choose their own, recognising that a unified system would facilitate coordination and data sharing as the scheme grows.

### 3.4 Frameworks, Standardisation, and Future Coordination:

- **Standardised Administration and Branding:** The group suggested developing a common framework and branded model for local schemes to ensure consistency in administration, insurance, and volunteer management, which would in turn simplify claims and compliance.
- **Joint Insurance Arrangements:** Mid Somerset Car Scheme Partnership and West Somerset schemes benefit from joint insurance policies, reducing costs for member schemes. The group agreed to explore joining these arrangements and involving the partnership in future meetings.
- **Centralised Resources and Information Packs:** The group agreed that increasing awareness is crucial, as many schemes and services are not widely known, such as Think Travel site. The group proposed using grant funds to



develop information packs and template materials for parishes, potentially employing someone to coordinate this work. This would help smaller parishes set up schemes efficiently and maintain consistency.

- **Future Coordination and Meetings:** The group agreed to invite the Mid Somerset Car Scheme Partnership and GP practices to the next main meeting to discuss insurance, frameworks, and coordination.

### 3.4 Addressing Community Transport Needs and Inclusion:

- **Children and Young People's Transport:** The group identified significant gaps in transport provision for children, particularly those unable to attend school due to lack of transport. They discussed the need for DBS checks for drivers, the possibility of chaperones, and the importance of including children and young carers in the scheme's remit.
- **Older and Vulnerable Residents:** Mandy Carrie and others highlighted the ongoing need for transport among older and vulnerable residents, especially those unable to drive. The scheme aims to address isolation and improve access to health and social services.
- **Bus Service Updates and Potential Impact:** Proposals planned to adjust two bus routes to serve Shepton Community Hospital more directly, which could impact the need for community car schemes, but further information will be obtained from Somerset Bus Partnership.
- **Community Engagement and Needs Assessment:** The partnership will use parish magazines, local networks, and direct outreach to assess transport needs and recruit volunteers, ensuring that the scheme reflects the unique requirements of each community.
- **Collaboration with Medical Centres and Local Organisations:** The group discussed engaging GP practices, patient participation groups, and local organisations such as Lions and WI to promote the scheme, recruit volunteers, and identify residents in need of transport.

### 3.5 Best Practice Sharing and Partnership with Existing Schemes:

- **Learning from Established Partnerships:** The group agreed to liaise with the West Somerset Car Scheme Partnership and other active groups to share best practices, discuss operational challenges, and explore joint solutions such as software and insurance arrangements.



- **Overlap and Collaboration with Existing Providers:** While concerns were raised about potential competition with existing providers, such as Mendip Community Transport about competition, our Somerset Council transport colleagues clarified that local schemes complement, rather than compete with, larger providers, especially given resource limitations and service restrictions of the latter.
- **Regular Meetings and Forums:** Participants proposed holding regular partnership meetings, more frequently than the annual sessions held by some existing groups, to ensure ongoing support, knowledge sharing, and responsiveness to emerging issues.

### **3.6 Youth Engagement and Social Inclusion Initiatives:**

- **Youth Councils and Research:** Laura reported on the establishment of youth councils and a research project led by Louise from Make the Sunshine, aimed at gathering data on young people's needs and informing Shepton Mallet Town Council's budget and service planning.
- **Addressing Social Isolation and Safety:** The group discussed issues such as social isolation, lack of youth facilities, and safety concerns, including the need for accessible toilets near youth amenities and the prevalence of grooming risks, with the intention of incorporating these findings into broader community support strategies.

## **4. Grant Funding**

- **Grant Status and Transition:** Cllr Dave Crisfield took over from Laura Miller regarding the £5,000 grant for the community car scheme project.
- **Extension of funding:** Following a meeting with the Somerset Community Foundation, it was agreed that the grant's timeline will be extended based on the progress so far and the engagement from town and parish councils, as well as partner organizations.
- **Use of Grant Funds:** The group discussed whether the grant could be used for an online booking system, coordinator payment, and promotional activities. They agreed that clarification will be obtained to ensure funds are used appropriately and in line with the grant's original intent.





**Useful sites:**

- [Car Schemes](#) – information on our Somerset Council website about existing schemes and how to set them up
- [Community Transport Association](#)
- [Road XS Transport Software](#)
- [Think Travel : Homepage](#)

