

SEEND COMMUNITY BUS

Charity Registration No. 1157309

VAT No. 188 807063

34 Seend Cleeve
Seend
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Wiltshire
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SEEND COMMUNITY BUS REPORT 2020 TO 2021

OVERVIEW OF THE YEAR

The mission of the charity is to provide transport in the rural areas of Seend and Bromham for those who have limited or no access to public transport. This service relies entirely on volunteers, not only to drive the vehicle but to keep it clean, monitor maintenance, keep proper records of usage, income and expenditure and liaise with service users and hirers. It also benefits from a good relationship with The MOT Centre at Bowerhill where Class 5 MOTs, regular safety inspections and general maintenance are carried out, sometimes at short notice.

The charity also benefits from a good relationship with Wiltshire Council and Community First who support all Wiltshire Community Transport Groups. As a member of the Wiltshire & Swindon Community Transport Association we are part of a broad, supportive group of organisations. We are also grateful to Seend Parish Council, not only for their financial support but also for keeping us informed of roadworks in the parish which may affect service routes.

Inevitably, the year was dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Less than a month into the financial year the Government introduced lockdown. All our services were suspended and all hirings were cancelled. The last hire of the year was Seend School's visit to Braeside activity centre on March 23rd. We were unable to operate at all until 25th August, when with socially distanced seating and strict cleaning regime in place, we were able to resume a service for a small group of passengers who were deemed to be those most in need. The morning school service resumed in September and was suspended again after Christmas.

During the closures we have been thankful for the regular Zoom meetings organised by Harry Tipple at Community First in collaboration with Jason Salter of Wiltshire Council.

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These were open to representatives of all Community Transport Groups (CTGs) in the region. This made it possible to keep informed about regulations, guidance and all implications for the charitable services we all provide. This was vital as we eased back into operation toward the end of the summer.

We were also kept informed about progress with the DfT review of Section 19 and Section 22 legislation. In that regard it transpires that for small operations like ours the impact will not be too great. We do not tender for Council contracts, so we are not competing with commercial operators. Furthermore, our Section 22 timetabled services have always been honed to provide transport to those who have little or no access to services run by bus companies. The main feature of the review for us concerns private hire of the vehicle. It is vital that we operate on a not-for-profit full cost recovery basis to groups, schools, clubs, etc who have no commercial base. We could not, for example, hire to a local profit-making company for a staff enrichment event. As all hirings are on a self-drive basis we are not competing with taxi companies. There has been great concern among CTGs over this review and we are grateful to Community First and Wiltshire Council for clarifying the ramifications.

SERVICES

All the services we operate have been hugely impacted by the pandemic but as schools reopened we were well prepared with a dedicated team of drivers and a bespoke cleaning regime. It was a challenge keeping track of credits and rollovers for pre-paid tickets as parents of pupils using the service usually pay at the beginning of each term and most had already paid in advance prior to the March and January school closure announcements. However, the service catered for 1915 passenger trips and covered 1108 miles.

Other Section 22 services were badly disrupted but in August we eventually resumed a limited version of the Tuesday service to Melksham following guidance on social distancing and consultation with passengers. There was a limit of six passengers, all from Bromham, who were eager to do their shopping and who had been relying on others to do it for them. There was only one Salisbury Section 19 trip in March before lockdown.

FUNDING

Seend Community Bus is supported by an annual grant from Wiltshire Council. The grant for the year has decreased over the last few years but there was no further decrease this year, remaining at £3430. To qualify for the Wiltshire Council grant The Trustees have to provide annual accounts and demonstrate that the service provided meets their criteria. To this end, a record is kept of the mileage for every trip made by the bus and the number of passengers it carries. We are also grateful to Seend Parish Council who, in keeping with previous years, made a donation of £400.

The regular service runs are also covered by the bus pass scheme. A monthly spreadsheet is sent to Wiltshire Council via their appointed agent showing how many bus pass trips were made and the Charity is reimbursed. This year the Council were instructed by central government to maintain Concessionary Fares reimbursement at pre-pandemic levels even though for much of the year we were carrying no passengers.

Other income is from private hirings, although this income was inevitably greatly reduced by lockdown.

MAINTENANCE

Weekly inspections of the bus are made by our in-house mechanic.

The MOT centre at Bowerhill carries out regular ten-weekly full safety inspections of the vehicle in compliance with the Section 19 and 22 Permit requirements and also undertakes any repairs needed.

Fortunately, we have been able to keep the vehicle maintained, regularly inspected and MOT'd throughout the year. It was also considered prudent to take the bus for occasional short runs to make sure it kept ticking over while not in use.

CLEANING

A number of local groups and individuals undertake monthly cleaning on a rota basis but this has been disrupted like everything else. Our secretary, Anita Shea, however, has access to an outside tap and hose so was able to keep the vehicle in a presentable state.

HIRINGS

In normal times the bus is very popular with numerous clubs, groups, societies and schools. However, there were only six hirings prior to lockdown, including the Bradford on Avon under 9's rugby tour. Twenty further bookings were cancelled and there is no knowing how many bookings we were unable to take in the rest of the year. Hire is charged at 75p per mile plus VAT. We do not, as a rule, provide a driver and hirers are asked to provide their own. All drivers must have D1 entitlement on their licence and undergo a familiarisation with the vehicle.

ACCOUNTING

A meticulous record of accounts is kept using a system of spreadsheets. This system was examined and approved by HMRC shortly after we voluntarily registered for VAT. All the following figures are given excluding VAT. The accounting system automatically totals VAT on hirings and VAT relating to expenditure and these are recorded separately on the balance sheet. Quarterly VAT returns are submitted online via the HMRC website.

Full accounts are prepared annually and submitted to Wiltshire Council to support the Annual Grant Application and also for the Charity Commission. Accounts are also forwarded to Seend Parish Council as a courtesy in return for their annual donation.

EXPENDITURE

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Total expenditure for the year was £2963.39 compared £6470.67 for the previous year.

1. Office Expenses were £62.49 compared with £121.52 last year. The only expense this year was for AVAST VPN (Virtual Private Network) to secure the laptop which holds all accounts and from which invoicing etc. is carried out.

2. Drivers/Officers Expenses were £19.20 compared to £40.00 last year.

3. Insurance/Licences cost £1626.11, a decrease from last year's £1758.87

4. Maintenance costs were £561.50 compared to last year's £1898.50 when major work was carried out following failure of the turbo, fire extinguishers were replaced and a new battery fitted.

5. Fuel costs were £512.55 compared to £2344.56 last year, reflecting the major reduction in vehicle use.

6. Medical tests for drivers who reach age 70 are paid for by the Charity and these vary in price depending on which surgery the test is carried out at. Fortunately, there is now a dedicated facility called D4Drivers based at WtL HGV driving school in Devizes where a D1 medical can be booked online and costs £55. In future we will direct our drivers there. During the year there were no medical tests required whereas last year one driver needed a medical at a cost of £115.

7. There was no need to hire another vehicle during the year, whereas last year we hired vehicles from other CTA's on two occasions at a cost of £171.25.

8. Other costs were £173.34 compared to £10 last year. W&SCTA subscription was waived this year but a new first aid kit was purchased along with a portable vacuum cleaner, PPE, hand sanitiser and cleaning materials.

INCOME

Total income for the year was £8777.13, a considerable reduction from £12720.86 but without the Wiltshire Council Grant and the continuation of Concessionary Fares at pre-pandemic levels we would have run a deficit budget for the first time since we began operating.

1. Income from Hirings was £442.45 compared to £3267.20 in the previous year. £311.95 of this was from the six hirings which took place during the year, the rest being payments from hirings which took place in 2019-2020.

2. Bus Fares for the "School" Run were £715.00 compared to £1138.70, reflecting school closures and, therefore, a reduced service.

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3. For the Other Service Runs income was just £20.00 from the one Section 19 run to Salisbury before lockdown, which carried four passengers. For comparison, last year's income for the Section 19 service and the handful of non-bus pass passengers on the Section 22 services was £532.00
4. Bus Pass Reclaims were very similar to the previous year at £3559.65 compared to £3668.63. Concessionary Fares repayments are made proportionately according to a complex formula. The average payment is £270 per month but quarterly reconciliation payments are made. This year the same formula was used but referentially averaged based on the year 2019-2020.
5. Donations are made up primarily of a £400 annual contribution by the Parish Council. The rest is from hirers topping up the amount on their invoice. The total for the year was just £400 (Parish Council) with no top-ups by hirers.
6. The Wiltshire Council Grant was £3430 as it was last year. We are assured that this will be the rate for the coming year, but, in the light of ongoing spending cuts, will be reviewed annually and probably reduced.
7. The surplus of income over expenditure for the year was £5813.74 compared to £6250.19 last year even though we ran a hugely reduced service, the reason being greatly reduced expenditure: £1300 less on maintenance and repairs, no hire of other vehicles and no D1 medical expenses.
8. Interest on the deposit account was £210.03, a reduction on £232.90 in the previous year.

SUMMARY

It has been a very difficult and unpredictable year, not just for Seend Community Bus but for the whole community transport sector. In spite of this we have managed to keep the operation of services viable for the future. We are fortunate to have an enthusiastic team of volunteers and a good relationship with our support network in the CTA community, Wiltshire Council, Parish Council and the MOT Centre, who maintain our vehicle in excellent condition. We are confident that, as the COVID 19 pandemic becomes more manageable, we will be able to offer a useful and valued service to the community for many years to come.

Looking ahead, there are issues which we need to address.

We have already started discussion about a replacement vehicle. The Mercedes Sprinter has served us well since we purchased it in 2014 but maintenance costs will inevitably increase as the bus ages. It is vital that periods when the vehicle is off the road are kept to a minimum. The process of selecting the right replacement, agreeing on the specifications, Seend Community Bus, 34 Seend Cleeve, Seend, Melksham, Wiltshire, SN12 6PY
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designating a coach builder and waiting for the vehicle to be prepared takes time. It can be up to a year from start to finish before we are able to take possession of our purchase. In light of the push toward green energy and the introduction of congestion charges in Bath and other cities we believe this should be high on the agenda when discussing the specification for a replacement vehicle. Our current vehicle runs on diesel with an Adblue system. This was considered to have low environmental impact when it was new but it does not meet the required standard for clean air zones and incurs a charge.

The recruitment of suitable volunteer drivers is a continuing concern for all CTA groups. This has been amplified by the pandemic. The majority of drivers are in the older age group and several CTA groups have lost drivers who no longer feel confident about volunteering. Recruitment will become a matter of increasing urgency over the next few years.

We have discussed our financial situation at some length over the course of the year. Although we are in a healthy position at present, with enough funds to purchase a new vehicle, it is important that we maintain a good income within the constraints of Charity Commission regulations and the rules regarding commerciality. We believe we are achieving the right balance, although with over £65,000 in the deposit account we are a little disappointed that we only made £210 interest. We have been looking into the possibility of an ethical investment of a substantial part of our reserve so that, when a new vehicle is purchased, we still have a healthy balance for running costs. The advantage of having the deposit account is that the funds would be instantly accessible. This is unlikely to be the case with an investment. We need to strike a balance between accessibility and the need to keep pace with the rate of inflation.

We believe that all these issues, along with making sure that our services meet the needs of the community, while keeping us focussed in the year ahead, will be addressed with prudence and in good faith.

This concludes the annual report of the Trustees of Seend Community Bus.

Report dated 30th October 2021

Prepared by P. Wallis (Chair)