

Community Transport provision in the Waikato Region

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Community Transport Providers offer transport to those in need, where no other suitable public transport option exists. This could include transport for health, education or social reasons.

They are a lifeline for our rural population, ensuring that people are able to continue living in rural areas, and still access the services they require.

Since 2011, community transport providers, territorial authorities, government agencies and the Waikato District Health Board have come together in a forum. The Forum exists to connect community transport providers with government agencies and transport planners, providing a voice for all and aiming to support transport that helps rural communities thrive. The forums, facilitated by Community Waikato, meet four times a year to share information, discuss good practices, create guidelines and policies and advocate for community transport provision so that people have transport options wherever they live.

The reason our communities do have the options they have now is because New Zealand is a country built on the back of volunteerism. One of the ways people volunteer is through community transport. This might look like driving people to hospital appointments or into town for shopping and social activities, caring for vehicles, being on a trust and meeting with other volunteers.

Our volunteers get as much out of being associated with community transport as the passengers do from their participation. In the Waikato Region we have 25 known community transport groups. Of those, a handful have a paid employee to coordinate the journeys. None have paid drivers. Our region covers Coromandel Peninsula, across to Te Kauwhata and Meremere in the north and down to Tokoroa and Taumarunui in the south. We are aware there are also other community transport options such as Marae running their own transport for their own people.

All of these groups have arisen from community, where one or two people have identified a need, worked with others and developed the community transport from there. Typically, the people who have set up the community transport have had a personal connection to recognising the need. Most have set up for the purpose of accessing medical appointments at Waikato Hospital in Hamilton. Someone they know has required transport and the community has rallied around to make it happen. After a while though, a coordinated effort leads to developing a Community Transport provision. For many groups, the provision goes beyond health shuttle. In Taumarunui it includes an arrangement with the local chemist and they do prescription deliveries as their community can be quite isolated. In Tairua it includes running weekend trips as a social enterprise to generate income to support the hospital type trips.

Every group is different as they are meeting the needs of THEIR community.

In Te Aroha, a Red Cross service has operated for ten years, run by a local committee and coordinated by a volunteer. Earlier this year the town heard that Red Cross nationally are no longer going to provide Community Transport, deciding it won't be their core business from December 2020. In my role as Community Advisor for Community Waikato, I was invited to facilitate a public meeting to discuss what the town could do about it. There were 40 odd people in the room, predominantly over 65. Some of those people were from the existing Red Cross committee but mostly; it was a room of users, supporters and community minded people. Many of them introduced

themselves listing the different groups they were a part of. It showed that these people know how to work together and be organised.

However, there was real tension in the room and I quickly realised that these people felt let down and anxious that this resource of a health shuttle was going to go. So I asked one of the volunteer drivers "Why are you here, why do you drive?". He said "because one day I might need a ride myself". The room erupted with clapping and agreement.

Needless to say, at that meeting it was easily agreed that a new entity would be formed and Red Cross be asked to transfer the van asset to this new group. As it stands now, the constitution for the Te Aroha Community Support Inc Society is in final draft, there is a committee of 8 people and the society's main purpose is "To maintain and operate community transport services including health shuttle". Red Cross have agreed to transfer assets in January 2021.

Another example of a community meeting growing need is the North Waikato Transport Trust, based in Huntly (population about 7000) which formed in 2015 because people were not able to get to their hospital appointments in Hamilton. They are a health shuttle and in their first year of operation did 850 trips for 268 clients. By 2017 they found demand was so great, especially as requests came in for other health related trips such as eye appointments and chemist visits, that they needed a second smaller vehicle and this was grant funded. There isn't central government funding to support their initiatives, so like all Community transport initiatives in the Waikato region, they are reliant on philanthropic grants, donations and small fundraising initiatives. Their operating costs for the year, including vehicle maintenance, petrol, insurance, renting an office space, and paying a part-time coordinator, come to \$90,000.

Groups like this survive because of their community's determination to support their own. Each community transport provider needs structure to operate, a legal status that gives them opportunities to seek and hold funds, to develop systems and policies to safeguard everyone involved and a sense of community wellbeing.

In the Waikato region this comes in different forms; those communities where they govern their own charitable trust or incorporated society, or those governed by a national provider – either St John (3 communities) or Red Cross (5 communities). Saying that, Red Cross are discontinuing this but in each community there are plans for another group to keep it going. Even those supported by the large national body have their own committees that deal with the running of the organisation and service.

I am not aware of any Community Transport group that has set up, failed and had to wind up. Saying that there is huge difference in resourcing of some of the groups. We have at least two groups where volunteers use their own cars and do not have any interest in managing an organisation vehicle. In those cases, the volunteers are governed by Community Houses.

I have asked Coordinators what their challenges are, expecting the responses to be about a lack of drivers or people not ready on time for their transport. Unanimously though, the responses were all about challenges with Waikato District Health Board. Mostly in relation to the times of appointments and discharge procedures. Also, the high expectations of the hospitals on these voluntary services.

Having the Community Transport Forum has improved things. Together, we work out solutions for ourselves. An example is that Waikato Hospital was calling the Community Transport providers at any time of the day to pick up discharge patients. Talking about this issue at a Forum meeting, everyone realised this was a shared problem. Concern over driver welfare and also that of the

patient who sometimes was arriving home to a dark, empty house. So collectively the providers agreed that they would say “No” to any request after 4.30pm and that a driver wouldn’t leave home until there was assurance that the discharge papers for the person were ready. Discharge procedures have really improved in the last year. A WDHB person also attends these forum meetings and does his best to help communication. The WDHB Consumer Council is also very aware of the Forum and transport is a regular theme for them.

Without a doubt, the most common issue for all the community transport providers is funding. At a national transport symposium Community Waikato hosted in November 2019, we heard from Canterbury Regional Council and Horizons Regional Council of their direct support to community transport providers.

Considering the great service our providers offer to enhance people’s health and social wellbeing, groups feel unappreciated by government and tired of having to spend so much of their time fundraising and asking their local communities to fund something they feel is an essential service. As a collective group, the forum is currently engaged with a regional funder and the regional council to investigate providing some ongoing operational funding to support these groups.

For any further discussion about Community Transport in the Waikato, please contact Sarah Gibb at sarah@communitywaikato.org.nz .