

Social Inclusion

Can car clubs help?



Car clubs are usually introduced as a way of reducing traffic growth, but research for the Motorists' Forum looked at car clubs from another perspective: how they might contribute to social inclusion. The research suggests that car clubs might increase access to services and facilities for people on low incomes and people with mobility difficulties. The Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) recent report on transport also identified car clubs as one of a number of measures to improve access.

How can car clubs help social inclusion?

Car clubs provide access to a car without the need for ownership. Cars are parked locally, overheads are low – membership is typically £120/year – and cars can be hired by the hour. The SEU transport report **Making the Connections** identifies several types of journey for which lack of transport can be a barrier to inclusion. Car club membership is not the right solution for some journeys, such as the daily commute; but it could help socially excluded people by enabling access to facilities they can't easily get to by other modes – whether it's healthcare, shops, job interviews or social activities.

The following target groups are most likely to benefit from car clubs :

- Lower income households with no car, or struggling to run a car
- Households where the only car is used for the daily commute, leaving others with no access to a car
- Less mobile or less active people, eg the elderly or disabled
- People setting up a small business, and those seeking employment

Barriers to using car clubs

Socially excluded people may face particular obstacles to car club membership, which need to be overcome or reduced in order to increase car club membership. For example:

- up-front costs (i.e. membership fee and deposit) may be too high
- there are restrictions on the insurance; typically drivers must be 21 – 77 years of age, have held a full driving licence for at least 12 months, and have a good driving history: criteria are tighter for the under 25s and over 75s
- insurance costs may be higher within some inner city communities
- the prestige of car ownership may sometimes be greater in areas of deprivation
- people with mobility difficulties may need an adapted car, or have difficulty getting to the car station
- in more isolated rural areas, pick up and return of vehicles may be difficult

Potential for car clubs in tackling social exclusion

Car club patronage is steadily increasing in the UK, and in general, early stages of operations tend to focus on mainstream users in order to establish the club's viability. As clubs mature, there is the potential to explore the possibilities of addressing the more challenging social inclusion issues, such as adapting vehicles, or planning for people who live in isolated or more deprived areas. However, several clubs already have elements within them that are dealing directly with social exclusion, and partnerships with community transport and other agencies are giving access to funding and resources.

Does it make environmental sense?

Will introducing car clubs to increase social inclusion simply increase car use? Not necessarily: non-car owners can provide the “critical mass” necessary to establish a car club, enabling other members to join and cut down their mileage. Non-car owners already use cars: they get lifts, hire cars or use taxi; research from Europe shows that joining a car club doesn’t significantly increase their mileage. Car clubs can intercept people before they buy a car, maintaining sustainable travel habits. And they provide an alternative to people struggling to keep a car on the road – possibly a polluting ‘old banger’.

Solutions, success stories and future plans

The City-Wheels car club in **Swansea** is the first car club in the UK to specifically serve social housing residents. It was set up by Swansea Housing Association in February 2001 to meet the needs of their City Living tenants – a project to encourage people to move back into the city centre. City Wheels cars are also used by Housing Association staff for both business and personal use, and membership is being offered to two other businesses who form part of their flagship mixed use development. Tasks related to the running of the club are done by staff in relevant departments within the Housing Association. See www.citywheels.co.uk .

The feasibility study for a car club in the rural China Clay area of **Cornwall** revealed that the cost of joining a car club would deter membership, but that there were travel needs which a car club could help meet. A one-year trial club launched in 2003, with reduced fees for people in receipt of means tested benefit; mileage and hourly rates have been kept low. People registered with Sure Start or Jobcentre Plus will have the full costs of membership and essential journeys met by those organisations. The car club is using ex-fleet County Council lease cars, with insurance as an extension of the Council’s policy to keep the costs down; this also allows for more flexibility with insurance criteria.

In **Whitby & Eskdale**, North Yorkshire, a car club will soon be launched to work in partnership with an existing project - Good Neighbours Community Transport – which currently operates a bus brokerage and a social car scheme. The club should be mutually beneficial, increasing voluntary driver recruitment from people who don’t own (or don’t want to use) their own car, as well as increasing the viability of the car club by increased usage of the vehicles. The club may also include cars adapted to take wheelchairs or to cater for some people with disabilities, thus enabling the club to be more inclusive.

Research for a car club on the **Tower Hamlets** Ocean Estate in London indicated that as well as providing access, a car club might increase personal security and reduce car vandalism related to racism. Potential partnerships include linking with an existing learner-driver project for Asian women. The cost per hour of car club use is not an issue amongst prospective users (who are used to high charges for taxis and minicabs); but the up front membership fee could be a major stumbling block to participation.

References

Social Exclusion Unit transport report

Motorists Forum report

Carplus conference speech 2002: Car clubs can they help social inclusion? – Lynn Sloman

For all reports see www.carplus.org.uk or contact Carplus.