

Measuring the Social Value of Community Transport & Ealing Community Transport's Social Value Toolkit – a Commentary by TAS Partnership Ltd (August 2019)

[This commentary derives from an impartial assessment of the Ealing CT Social Value Toolkit that was undertaken by TAS Partnership for a third party client.]

The key value that CT brings to the communities it serves is its potency in reducing social exclusion, yet there is often little empirical evidence to demonstrate exactly how large a contribution CT operations make. Community transport operators generally report only outputs (numbers of passengers carried, distances etc.) rather than outcomes (e.g. journey purposes, activities that have been enabled).

As a result, and often despite the best efforts of the CT sector and its advocates, the social and economic benefits of the journeys provided often go unrecognised by external agencies. This is especially so of the health sector, who – it is often believed – would commission and / or support such services in a more proactive and empathic way if there was a more thorough and enlightened understanding of the mutual benefit.

More recently, there have been severe cuts in public sector funding support for CT, challenges from private operators around the legality of some CT services, and scrutiny by DfT into the usage of s19 and s22 Permits. The need for the CT sector to develop a robust evidence base of its activities has never been more critical.

Nonetheless, over the past 10 years there has been a growing interest in measuring the social value of community transport journeys. This measurement aims to quantify the specific benefits that CT services provide to individuals, communities, public sector agencies and other stakeholders. This benefit can in some cases be expressed in monetary terms. The valuation objectives can be varied, but the CT sector has particularly recognised a need to be able to demonstrate its value to local authorities and especially to health and social care agencies.

So, for example, each CT journey might have benefits for the individual (wellbeing, continued independent living, lack of isolation) and the NHS and local authorities (savings on medical and social care interventions that might be more extensive and / or expensive had the individual not been able to access the transport service). This would form an evidence base of social impacts.

The real challenge has been to identify an appropriate system for measuring social impacts along with a plausible method of valuation. The passenger trips delivered by CT operators can be a difficult area to subject to a methodical impact evaluation, due to the sector's operational diversity (each CT is unique), the way data is collected and reported (often shaped by differing requirements of funders), and the lack of any nationally recognised evaluation framework for the sector.

Whilst the need for a CT-specific valuation system had been recognised for some time, and some evaluation studies had been undertaken within the CT sector, it was not until Ealing

Community Transport (ECT) launched its CT Social Value Toolkit (SVT) in 2018 that a valuation model was aimed solely at the wider CT sector, and which had been designed specifically for this purpose by a CT operator. ECT had developed its approach as part of the London Strategic Community Transport Forum, and produced a highly regarded Why Community Transport Matters (Deloitte, 2016), which evaluated the costs of loneliness and isolation and indicated the potential savings CT can make in health and social care costs, both in the Ealing context and UK-wide.

The SVT offers a number of advantages to the CT sector. Previous approaches had generally been undertaken by external auditors and had not produced findings that could be readily compared with other CTs due to lack of commonality of valuation metrics. The SVT seeks to address this issue by its overall design (as a universal tool that can be applied to both small rural car schemes and large urban multi-modal CT operations) and its use of officially-derived common proxy values (with some variables to account for regional weightings).

Perhaps more importantly, the Toolkit does not require any specialist knowledge or extraneous time and energy to manipulate, making it very user-friendly to the busiest CT operator. Over the past 12 months the SVT has been adopted and used by over 35 CT operators. Another advantage is the fact that the SVT is not marketed commercially, and is very cost-effective. To aid its convenience, some commercial CT software providers have been able to incorporate the SVT data protocols into booking and scheduling systems.

Independent verification has been factored into the SVT process at two levels. Firstly, the overall approach was subject to independent scrutiny by Buzzacott, an established London accountancy and audit company. Secondly, ECT recommends that the SVT findings are given an external review by each CT operator before publication. These measures, along with a number of safeguards against over-estimation and robust discounts within the system, seek to present plausible and conservative benefit values. However, the SVT does not value every kind of CT journey and makes some generic assumptions – at present it is not calibrated to reflect local values (many metrics are not readily available), and uses many UK averages. This fact may deter some CTs from using it. However, future amendments to the SVT may address this.

At present, there is little choice of valuation systems that offer both cost-effectiveness and practicality / ease of use for the CT operator. In this context, the ECT approach can provide benefits both for individual operators, and in terms of moving towards an approach where the collective value of CT services can be collated and recognised – which a wider acceptance of the practice of social value measurement would enable. The latter position may still be some way off, but the first step would be for each CT to begin to collect data and present its outcomes in a consistent way, and the SVT provides a readily available system to achieve this.

The need to recognise and value the outcomes of CT journeys will become increasingly important and operators should move towards adopting a system that best suits their needs. ECT's SVT is a useful option for CT operators wishing to embed social valuation into their reporting approach.