




# “It’s such a big ask for a volunteer”: Community transport as a sticking plaster solution to rural transport poverty

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## ABSTRACT

Compared to urban settings, rural areas are characterised by high rates of car ownership and few alternative transport options. This can lead to transport poverty, especially among older adults without car access. Community transport, not-for-profit and primarily volunteer-run local transport schemes, helps to address this rural transport poverty in the UK. This paper focuses on the emergence and evolution of these schemes, presenting a critical analysis that traces the researchers’ discomfort that arose during a study on community transport in Oxfordshire. Unpacking this discomfort draws attention to two societal processes that have shaped the emergence and evolution of community transport: neoliberalism and automobility. Results indicate how community transport can be rolled out in response to the neoliberal roll-back of the state, in this case cuts to bus subsidies and the National Health Service (NHS). However, community transport is often itself rolled-back by the state as part of further rounds of financial cuts, prompting providers to improvise ways to continue what they understand to be an essential service. Further, community transport emerges as a car-based solution in increasingly car-dependent contexts and, as such, re-enforces and further normalizes automobility. Although community transport schemes address rural transport poverty, they do not at present tackle the source of this challenge: the interconnected processes of neoliberalism and automobility. The paper concludes with a discussion of the current role of the community sector as a sticking plaster solution to rural transport poverty, as well as its potential role in contributing to the dismantling of neoliberalism and automobility.

## 1. Introduction

Rural areas are significantly understudied in transport research when compared to urban settings (Quallen et al., 2022), a tendency that has persisted for decades (Nutley, 1996). Rural areas also have a distinct transport landscape. While they do not tend to face many of the challenges common in urban areas (e.g., congestion, parking, air pollution), they are characterised across the Global North by high rates of car ownership (Kersting et al., 2021; Knierim and Schlüter, 2021; Nutley, 1996; Osti, 2010; Spinney et al., 2020). These rates are also rising slowly in many countries, including the United Kingdom (UK) (Department for Transport, 2024; Gray et al., 2006). This trend is not necessarily due to greater wealth, but due to greater reliance on cars as few other options exists (Knierim and Schlüter, 2021; Nutley, 1996; Osti, 2010). Further, austerity measures in the UK have included cuts to public transport support and have increased poverty in rural areas (Doebler, 2025). This means that those without a car in rural areas often experience lower

mobility, barriers to accessing destinations, isolation, and ultimately social exclusion (McDonagh, 2006). This social exclusion has been conceptualized as the result of transport poverty, in other words the combination of social disadvantage (e.g., not having access to a car) and transport disadvantage (e.g., living in an area with few other mobility options) (Lucas, 2012; Lucas et al., 2016).

Many of those without access to a car are older adults, a segment of the population less likely to drive (Chihuri et al., 2016; Curl et al., 2015; Curl et al., 2014; Gale et al., 2014). This results in unique challenges associated with ageing rurally, including maintaining access to transportation (Graham et al., 2018; Hansen et al., 2020). In line with global trends, this older segment of the population is growing in the UK (Office of National Statistics, 2018). Further, older adults make up a greater proportion of the UK’s rural population than its urban one (Graham et al., 2018). Given that rural areas are characterised by both strengthening car dependence and an ageing population, the relative lack of research focused on transport in rural areas is concerning.

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In this paper we respond to this research gap by focusing on a unique form of transport that addresses rural transport poverty: community transport. Community transport comprises many diverse and community-run schemes, including dial-a-ride, volunteer car schemes, and community minibuses. These schemes all aim to provide low-cost transport in under-served areas, and as such are particularly significant for older people living rurally (Community Transport, 2021). Through qualitative fieldwork, this paper explores the context in which community transport has emerged and evolved. By tracing our discomfort experienced while conducting the study, we identify two processes that have shaped community transport, neoliberalism and automobility, and raise important questions about the role of community, and community transport specifically, in addressing systemic issues of rural transport poverty.

## 2. Methods

To better understand transport poverty in rural areas, we developed a research project on older adults' mobility focusing on (amongst other things) how older adults' experiences meeting their basic needs varies across the urban-rural continuum. The geographic focus was Oxfordshire, a county of approximately 700,000 residents in the Southeast of England. Oxfordshire is largely rural. Its largest city, Oxford, is relatively small with a population of roughly 150,000 people, and only a handful of other towns have over 15,000 residents. Oxfordshire is also a relatively affluent county, exhibiting comparatively low levels of deprivation according to the UK's Indices of Multiple Deprivation (Ministry of Housing, 2019).

During the planning and undertaking of fieldwork, a unique form of transport with great potential to address rural transport poverty became a central focus: community transport. Unlike conventional forms of transport (buses, trains, taxis), community transport comprises many diverse community-based and largely volunteer-run transport schemes that follow a not-for-profit model (Community Transport, 2021). Community transport is not unique to Oxfordshire: it comprises a large network of approximately 2000 diverse schemes across the UK (Community Transport Association, 2012). Oxfordshire alone has 80 operational community transport organizations (Oxfordshire Community Transport, 2022). In Oxfordshire, common schemes include community minibuses (small buses that either provide a door-to-door service to members or run a scheduled route designed to meet older adults' needs) and volunteer car schemes (a door-to-door service from one's home to a destination, usually a health-related one, in a volunteer's personal vehicle that must be booked ahead of time). More detail on community transport operations in Oxfordshire is provided in (Ravensbergen and Schwanen, 2024a).

Our research largely focused on these diverse, informal schemes and their role in providing transport in Oxfordshire. Community transport schemes operating in Oxfordshire were contacted through the county's Community Transport Directory (Oxfordshire Community Transport, 2022) and invited to partake in the research. Ravensbergen conducted interviews and observations with community transport providers across the county over the summer of 2022. Interview questions touched on four themes: organizational structure, procedures, benefits, and challenges. At the time, she was a postdoctoral fellow at the Transport Studies Unit at the University of Oxford. She positioned herself as a transport expert, but not an expert on community transport. As such, participants appeared to easily take on the role of explaining how these schemes work during the interviews.

A total of 28 interviews with 21 providers took place, lasting 20–90 min in length. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019, 2021). These interviews were complemented with observations (e.g., riding along in community transport schemes, attending an AGM, attending social events with community transport users and providers present). For additional discussion of the methods employed, please see our past work

on how community transport operates (Ravensbergen and Schwanen, 2024a,b).

Throughout the interviews with community transport providers, the benefits of this transport scheme were immediately apparent. Remarks from volunteers included: “we know that it is a vital service,” “I don't know what they would do without us,” and “It's a lifeline. It is literally their only option.” When Ravensbergen joined trips organized by these schemes as part of the observation component of fieldwork, passengers were full of praise, beyond grateful for the service provided. “I don't know what I would do without it” was, indeed, a common refrain. Clearly, community transport fills an important gap for those with no (or few) other options, especially older people living in rural areas. In other words, community transport addresses and to some extent mitigates transport poverty in rural areas of the UK (Lucas, 2012; Lucas et al., 2016). Given that the negative impacts of transport poverty are stronger among people living rurally in the UK, especially those who are low-income (Gates et al., 2019), this finding points to the utmost importance of community transport in the lives of many vulnerable populations in the UK.

And yet, as fieldwork, initial analysis and our reflexive discussions and planning sessions continued, tensions emerged. We felt discomfort as the fragility of many community transport schemes became evident. Volunteer car schemes can easily become overwhelmed when the demand for the service is too great. Most schemes are fully volunteer run, meaning that coordinators must carefully balance an organization's operations to ensure volunteers are not overextended (see also Ravensbergen and Schwanen, 2024a). The difficulty of recruiting sufficient volunteers was the most frequent challenge reported. A common refrain was: “we're stretched, we haven't got many volunteers.” Many schemes stay small and informal on purpose by only serving specific destinations (usually health-related appointments). Community minibus schemes also struggle to recruit sufficient volunteers, and they have the added stress of acquiring sufficient funding to cover the costs of owning and operating a minibus. Indeed, two of the 21 schemes included in this study had either shut down or were in the process of shutting down during the interview. Given how important community transport is as a “vital lifeline” to many older and/or more vulnerable rural residents, the fragility of these schemes was concerning.

This concern highlighted the importance of understanding not just how community transport works (Ravensbergen and Schwanen, 2024a, b), but why it works the way it does. To fully understand community transport, we must consider not only what it is and the service it provides, but the context in which it has emerged, and in which it now operates. We highlight this context in this article through a critical reflexive process (Faria and Mollett, 2016; Rose, 1997) in which we trace our discomfort during fieldwork. This discomfort highlights larger societal processes that have shaped community transport's emergence, namely neoliberal governmentality and car dependence, which provide the theoretical framework for this article.

## 3. Theoretical framework

We follow Aiken et al. (2017, page 2) in understanding community and communities as “as sites of contestation, difference, tension, and distinction.” Rather than as intrinsically ‘good,’ we consider community and communities as complex configurations that emerge from internal and external but always power-laden relations. This implies, among other things, that we take community transport to mean different things to its many members, and to the different authorities, agencies and other organizations with which it interacts. Here we are particularly interested in tracing the evolving arrangements and environments in which community transport is situated, and specifically the two inter-related processes that emerged as critical during the study – i.e., neoliberalism and automobility.

Neoliberalism is a flexible mode of governing that comes in many varieties in which abstract ideals of favouring free-market capitalism, deregulation, and reduction in government spending play important

roles. Its ideals were materialized through the dismantling of post-war welfare institutions and policies in the 1980s in the North Atlantic, a shift now embodied by the Thatcher and Regan era (Peck and Tickell, 2002). Transport was no exception. In the UK, the Thatcher-led Transport Act 1985 transferred the operation of bus services from public bodies to private companies (Gillingwater and Sutton, 1995).

Neoliberalism is often associated with cuts in government spending, what Peck and Tickell (2002) call 'roll-back neoliberalism'. It is now understood as being also complemented by 'roll-out neoliberalism' (*ibid.*), or the introduction of new institutions, policies, and regulatory relations that facilitate a transfer of the absorption of the costs of service provision in sectors such as transport from the state to the market and/or civil society. These 'rolled-out' developments began in the UK and Western Europe in the 1990s and sought to stabilize the marginalization caused by neoliberal 'roll-back'. In this way they can be understood as a form of 'crisis management' that further entrenches neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell, 2002). Community groups can play a role here; as they can be rolled out in response to neoliberal roll-back (e.g., see Rosol (2012) on how volunteer community gardening groups in Berlin were rolled out to fill the gap created when spending on municipal labour, or roll-back neoliberalism, occurred). In this paper we demonstrate how community transport has been both rolled out to fill a void left by the neoliberal roll-back of bus services and NHS patient transport. We also find that community transport has been rolled back itself through funding cuts to its services.

Neoliberalism has always extended beyond economic policy and into governance of everyday life (Miller and Rose, 2008). The economic logic of the market permeates routine interactions and social relations have been reorganized around the logics of enterprise (Moisander et al., 2017). Citizens have been made to, and come to, internalize neoliberal principles by espousing independence, hard work, and entrepreneurship. These ideal neoliberal subjects 'self-regulate' to limit their risk of relying on the state for services (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2007; Ling, 2000; May et al., 2005). Community is not immune to neoliberal governmentalities (e.g., Rosol (2012)). In this research, we find that some community transport providers also internalize this neoliberal logic by prioritizing 'cost effectiveness' and using business-oriented language (e.g., referring to passengers as 'clients' and 'customers').

The second theoretical concept with which this paper engages is automobility. This can be summarized as a complex arrangement that links the use and ownership of the privately owned automobile to historical-geographically particular and evolving political-economic interests and structures, cultural practices and values, processes of social mobility and stratification, and institutionalized formations for knowledge production, policy and governance (Böhm et al., 2006; Geels et al., 2011; Gopakumar, 2020; Manderscheid, 2014; Merriman, 2009; Urry, 2004, 2008). Theorisations of the nature of automobility differ but they tend to converge in highlighting its pervasiveness as arrangement across multiple registers – politics (how automobiles are regulated), ideology (the automobile as bound up in discourses of freedom, privacy, modernity, autonomy, and responsibly caring for dependants), and phenomenology (as a modality of experiencing the world). Much has been written about how automobility may have peaked in Global North cities, at least in its classic, individually owned versions (Goodwin and Van Dender, 2013; Newman and Kenworthy, 2011). Yet, in rural contexts Urry's (2004, 2008) proposition that automobility is self-expansive – that through restructuring time and space it generates the need for ever more cars – continues to ring true. Today Global North societies remain 'locked in' automobility. The car is so engrained in everyday lives through physical infrastructure, financial reliance, and political weight that it is resilient and has the capacity to endure, although aspects like its energy source (e.g., electric vehicles), the completion of driver tasks and even ownership arrangements may change (Schwanen, 2016; Wells, 2023).

For some commentators, automobility has been co-opted by, and become entwined with, the rise and reconfiguration of neoliberal

governmentalities (Paterson, 2007; Rajan, 2006; Walks, 2015). This is partly because car use and supporting infrastructures are widely understood and represented as enabling the individual autonomy, choice and do-it-yourself biographies that neoliberalism holds dear. It is also because automobility, taken as aggregate outcome of what people really want, is regularly deployed by (certain) decision-makers, authorities, media and pressure groups to legitimize reduced public transport provision and/or counter 'nanny state' interventions to shift trips from cars to other, more sustainable transport modes. The normalization of automobility in rural settings both undergirds and goes beyond such governmental rationalities. As Phillips and Dickie (2019) highlight, car access and use were deemed essential to everyday life in the five rural districts across England considered in their study. Nine out of ten participants never made use of public transport, and 46 % recognized that public transport access might be a problem – not for them personally, but for others unable to drive. This praxis is partly a consequence of limited public transport provision but can also be mobilized for roll-back of state supported transport services. In this research, we find that increasing rural car dependence makes community transport, a partially car-based solution, appear as the obvious solution to neoliberal roll-back of shared transport options such as the bus or NHS patient transport.

#### 4. Results: neoliberal roll-back and roll-out

Results indicate that numerous overlapping neoliberal roll-backs of rural bus services, roll-outs of community transport, and subsequent roll-backs of these same community transport schemes have occurred in Oxfordshire and England more widely in recent years. Interviewees would rarely point to specific events, instead they shared their general awareness of these processes. Although these roll-backs and roll-outs overlapped and did not occur linearly, the following section is divided in three sections: the roll-back of rural transport, the roll-out of community transport, and finally the roll-back of community transport.

##### 4.1. The neoliberal roll-back of rural transport

*"A lot of the villages no longer hav[e] a local bus service because the funding has been withdrawn."* – Community Minibus Coordinator in the City of Oxford

Interviewees identified two ways in which rural transport services have been rolled back: cuts to bus subsidies and cuts to National Healthcare Services (NHS) funding. These cuts in spending are among the most visible manifestations of roll-back neoliberalism in England's rural areas (Peck and Tickell, 2002). These cuts are made possible by the deep entrenchment and normalization of automobility.

Funding support for busses across England and Wales was cut between 2010-11 and 2016-17 by £103 million. In England, this represents a 33 % reduction in spending (Campaign for Better Transport, 2018). Cuts in spending and service provision coincide; recent research has found that rural bus service provision has dropped by 52 % since 2008 in England (Morgan, 2023). Most interviewees operating community transport, especially those in Oxfordshire's villages, commented on the reduced bus service their community was facing. Specific cuts were never mentioned directly. Instead, a general awareness that cuts had taken place in waves, and that said cuts were ongoing, was apparent. For instance, a volunteer shared: *"in our area we're having our buses cut back exponentially, so it's a nightmare [...] the bus has just been cut back, and cut back, and cut back ... and there are people who just can't get anywhere."* While some communities have never had an adequate bus service (or any bus service), most mentioned recent cuts in service due to spending cuts from the County Council. As one interviewee shared: *"in 2015, I think, they withdrew all subsidies to bus services that weren't feasible commercially, the County Council, which is the local transport authority, so quite a few just stopped."* Cuts in bus subsidies were ongoing at the time of the interviews, with authorities using the COVID-19 pandemic to justify

and enact the most recent ones: “since COVID, the Council have also been looking to cut back on their support of things, local transport, so we heard of a lot of the villages no longer having a local bus service because the funding has been withdrawn.” In all cases, cuts to bus services normalize the car as the only way to travel in rural areas.

A second roll-back was identified: cuts to NHS funding. Notably, the Non-Emergency Patient Transport Service offered by the NHS has been reduced over the years, impacting rural transport. This service transports eligible patients to scheduled appointments and treatment, primarily in hospitals. Funding pressures on the NHS have resulted in a tightening of who is eligible for these transport services, with great variation in criteria apparent across the UK (Age UK, 2019). As was the case for cuts to bus funding, specific changes were not mentioned by interviewees. Rather, a general awareness of these cuts, and their reinforcement of automobility, was demonstrated. Take the following volunteer car scheme coordinator who shared: “when the NHS started to cut ambulance services, or services were restricted to certain people, and that’s when we really decided that it would be better just to do driving.” Others explained how difficult it was for their passengers to qualify for NHS services due to heightened eligibility criteria: “There is a hospital transport service. But the criteria are so tight, that very few ... you’ve got to be really, really impaired, or have a health reason why you can’t go in anything but an ambulance to qualify.” Not only are fewer people qualifying for this service, but the time window in which patient transport operates has also been cut. This further normalizes car-based travel, as one interviewee shared: “there’s been cuts everywhere. So, I mean, the non-emergency patient transport, you know, that works in such a small window, they run really from 10 to 4, so anything that falls outside of that Community Car Schemes are often called on.”

Other, more general, cuts to the NHS have also impacted rural transport, although less directly than cuts to patient transport service. For instance, the strain on the healthcare system has meant that patients now need to travel farther to get to their appointment: “the Oxfordshire hospitals are now farming appointments out much wider afield. And, so, we’re taking patients further now.” In many cases this directly impacts community transport schemes which now have a wider diversity of destinations, many of which are also farther away. In one volunteer’s words: “I’m taking people to [names hospital] from [names town served]. It’s a 70-mile round trip. So, you know, it’s a long way to go.” Not only are the journeys to health appointments now longer, but they are also sometimes at less convenient times, such as weekends: “And hospitals have started doing more appointments on Saturday and Sunday which is very annoying.”

These austerity measures not only represent classic examples of neoliberal roll-back, but also reinforce automobility: funding cuts that make alternatives to the private car more challenging normalize car use further.

#### 4.2. Filling the “void”: the neoliberal roll-out of community transport

“When the service bus through the villages stopped, we started taking residents” – Rural Community Minibus Volunteer

Throughout fieldwork, discomfort emerged as it became apparent that community transport was not just operating in a rural transport landscape that has experienced neoliberal roll-back. In addition, it became clear that community transport was often rolled out to deliver a service that was once provided by – or at least subsidized by – the state. Significantly, it is community members who took the initiative and were the primary actors in this roll-out, albeit often with support from the local state.

The roll-out of community transport is starkest for community minibus schemes. In fact, four of the seven such schemes included in this study emerged as a direct response to a lack of service caused by neoliberal roll-back. Take, for example, how the following county-wide minibus community transport organization was created to fill a gap after

the County Council had removed bus subsidies:

Well, we created it [the community minibus organization] about 5-5½ years ago because the Council got rid of bus subsidies, so the corporate bus companies, being what they are, decided that anything they weren’t making a massive profit on, that was it. They were just gonna [blows]! and away you go. So [the community minibus organization] was brought in. (Cross-County Community Minibus Scheme Operator)

Another community minibus scheme, this time one operating in a village context, also emerged directly because of bus service cuts:

There was a major issue in that the rural bus services were being cut. Basically people in the rural communities were being left with no means to, you know, go about their daily lives. [...] it was just basically this increasing void [...] it originated in a place called [names town] where they pulled a service and basically they had the idea, and it was in motion, but it was sped up by the need in this particular village and that’s where it started from. And they raised enough money to buy a bus. (Community Minibus Coordinator Operating in an Oxfordshire town)

This neoliberal roll-out was carried out by community members who devoted ample time and resources to doing so, and thus absorbed some of the costs of offering a service the local state was not, or no longer, willing to provide. They not only “raised enough money to buy a bus,” but also invested – and continue to invest – the time and skill required to start-up (e.g., acquiring bus permits, completing paperwork, organizational governance, etc.) and maintain (e.g., recruit, train, and manage volunteers, bus maintenance and upkeep, etc.) the service. Two other schemes were not created as a direct response to neoliberal roll-back but were still expanded to offer alternative services when rural buses were discontinued. For instance, an organizer of one scheme explained: “When the service bus through the villages stopped, we started taking residents of [names villages] on our [names destination town] trips.”

For volunteer car schemes, the funding cuts to rural bus subsidies increased the need for community transport provision. As a volunteer driver put it: “our village bus service is unfortunately going to be cut at the end of this year, so I am sure we will be called upon more often. Probably not just from elderly people.” COVID-19 was thought to accelerate this trend, with one interviewee who works to support community transport noting:

Because of the pandemic, passengers have not returned to normal on commercial services. So, there’s a strong likelihood that even more services that are really relied upon rurally - and even in the city - will go. So, there will be more pull on the existing community transport schemes.

For some car schemes, community transport neither emerged due to roll-back, nor replace a previously existing bus service, as there never was one in the villages it serves. However, one of the scheme’s organizers is aware that the work they did could be seen as the responsibility of the state and not the community:

We can certainly see where we would be appealing to a local council or a transport company, because basically the problem has gone away for them. So, if the people of [names village] want to complain that there is no bus coming in regularly, the Council might feel obliged to pay a contractor to run a bus to have three people a week in it. And clearly, it’s not cost effective for them. And so, with us operating, we’ve managed to bypass that. (Rural Volunteer Car Scheme Coordinator)

The quote demonstrates how the “problem” of rural public transport provision is understood through a neoliberal calculus of cost effectiveness and a questioning of who should absorb the costs of service provision – the (local) state, the market, or civil society. While this problematization is primarily that of the County Council and commercial bus operators, the quote is suggestive of the difficult position in which it places community transport schemes. Seeking to offer a means to reach essential destinations to highly vulnerable rural residents, the schemes are co-opted in a neoliberal Catch-22 that legitimates the

problematization. It also highlights how volunteer car schemes are deeply entrenched in automobility: car-centric solutions to rural transport poverty such as volunteer car schemes are put forth as the logical – read “*cost effective*” – solution, preferred over state-funded solutions such as a bus service.

As discussed above, cuts to the NHS have also negatively impacted rural transport. Community transport has again filled the void left by this roll-back, with community transport organizations having taken on additional demand for lifts to hospital appointments. These additional lifts to hospital appointments often placed increased demand on volunteers because they entailed more and longer journeys at a wider range of times (as discussed above). While many organizers commented on the increased strain, only a handful directly blamed funding cuts. One that did pointedly shared:

*And what really annoys me is that still you've got lots, like you've got the NHS Trusts, you've got local authorities, kind of thinking about volunteering as a free workforce. And that is just wrong. And it will just stop people wanting to get involved, because, you know, it's jobs they're trying to get volunteers to replace. And everyone can see that.* (Employee of an Organization that Supports Community Transport, emphasis in original)

This organizer makes a causal connection between the drive for cost cutting amongst local governments and healthcare providers and the community transport organizations' challenges to recruit sufficient suitable volunteers and meet the increased demand for their services. Neoliberal logics of cost cutting at the core of rural transport provision not only generate the unfulfilled mobility needs to which community transport organizations respond but also overwhelm those organizations because the labour involved is misrecognized and devalued.

Neoliberal logics permeate community transport in other ways too. These included how volunteers conceptualized and discursively constructed community transport. Those who use the service were most frequently referred to as ‘clients’ or ‘customers,’ rather than ‘passengers,’ ‘community members,’ or ‘users.’ The schemes themselves were spoken of as a ‘service,’ and one that had many business-oriented priorities at its core. For instance, a minibus volunteer shared his concerns about ‘profitability’: “*we're constantly having to rearrange routes to make sure that they are ... profitable in inverted commas.*” As another example, a community minibus volunteer shared the following while discussing the challenges in deciding whether to run their route more frequently:

*there would be more flexibility for the customers if the bus ran twice a day, every day. But it's going to be empty for many days of the week. So, you know, I get that. I see there's an inefficiency in that as well.* (Rural Community Minibus Volunteer)

Here, the volunteer speaks of the scheme as if it were a for-profit bus – one that must balance the needs of the “customers” without too much “inefficiency.” These business-oriented logics were common in the interviews, and surprising to hear given that all schemes are community-based, not-for-profit organizations. They highlight the ways in which neoliberalism has come to govern grassroots initiatives that to some extent resemble a social innovation – i.e., a locally embedded form of social action that addresses from below the needs of vulnerable groups that are by and large neglected by the public sector and the market (Galego et al., 2022; MacCallum, 2009). While community transport in Oxfordshire addresses distinctive needs in locally embedded ways that centre solidarity and reciprocity, it also functions – and is made to function – in ways that uphold and consolidate “a fast-forwarding neoliberalization process” (Swyngedouw, 2009, page 63) in the rural transport context. Recognizing the Janus-faced qualities of community transport (Swyngedouw, 2009; see also Schwanen et al. (2015)) caused us immense discomfort – an experience intensified by the observation that some of our interviewees were more aware of the schemes' implication in the ongoing neoliberalization of rural transport than most.

#### 4.3. The roll-back of community transport

“*Well, something's got to give*” – City of Oxford Community Minibus Coordinator

And yet, community transport's implication in roll-back/roll-out neoliberalism is more complex than hitherto suggested for it has also experienced roll-back. This is particularly the case for community minibuses. Of the seven schemes included in this study, three had recently had their funding cut drastically, resulting in civil society absorbing an even greater share of the costs of rural transport service provision than before. For one community minibus scheme, all government funding was cut over the past few years, and their manager shared: “*I used to have a £3.2-million budget. Now I have £0. [...] The government decided they didn't want to give us any money anymore* (exasperated laugh).” This organization now operates from income generated through two more ‘profitable’ (note the neoliberal logics implied in discussing profitability) transport services and piecemeal and competitive subsidies for which they must apply: “*If it wasn't for subsidies we apply for each year, we couldn't do it. We'd lose half a million pounds operating the service. [...] I couldn't cover it in my budget, my nominal budget. Which is not right. In my opinion.*”

The other four never had stable streams of government funding: they have always stayed afloat by receiving a patchwork of small funding from diverse places including grants, private fundraising, and donations from corporations, charities, trusts, and private citizens. This means that ample (unpaid and volunteer) labour can be required to acquire funding in this decentralized manner. As the organizer of one scheme put it: “*we just kind of, you know, just try pull it [money] in everywhere* (laughs).” Of note, asking community groups to compete for resources is closely aligned with neoliberal governmentality (Rosol, 2012). Community buses also charge fares to the public and receive money from councils to compensate for passengers who use concessionary bus passes. This strategy helps them stay afloat financially and is certainly in line with business-oriented logics.

The volunteer car schemes operate on such minimal budgets that they do not have funds to be rolled back. They instead contend with the second-order effects of roll-back of public and community bus operations manifested in ever-increasing demand for rides and a constant concern about being able to meet that demand through volunteer labour. As discussed above, the most frequent challenge volunteer car schemes faced was recruiting enough volunteers. Most schemes restrict their size to stay manageable by only serving certain clientele and only driving to specific destinations. The expansion of voluntary car schemes has not been accompanied with government financial support. In the words of an employee of an organization that supports community transport:

*I think this has really come about from austerity measures. Because I think from 2010 onwards, really, you have local authorities saying “right, library services are going. Children's centers are going, transport is going, and the immediate health services, some provision is going”, so the immediate response was “right, well, let's, let's kind of abuse the community led response, by framing it as “if you want these services, we'll help you” – but, actually, in the end, they didn't really help. Or fund.*

They also highlighted the irony of expecting volunteer-led initiatives to succeed where commercial ones did not:

*All these buses that went, they immediately went “why can't the community transport scale up? Why can't these volunteers scale up?”, as though they're somehow entrepreneurs and ready to take it on, when a commercial service couldn't possibly make it financially feasible! It's very odd.*

This quotation highlights how the ongoing neoliberalization of rural transport provision is partly upheld by unrealistic expectations about the capabilities of community transport. The partial roll-back of this

sector throws the absence of realism among some actors in sharp relief.

## 5. Results: community transport as entrenched in automobility

Our discomfort only intensified when we realized that re-instituting and/or increasing bus subsidies and NHS funding alone might not address rural transport poverty. Some interviewees shared how commercially operated buses – and even hospital transport – would not be appropriate for many of their passengers. For example, one interviewee was very aware of the effects on older adults of bus services in her community being reduced: “So a lot of elderly people are isolated. Literally isolated. And some people I see, I’m the only person they’ve seen all week! And that’s sad. That’s really sad”. She was also, however, aware of the ways in which bus services would not suit her passengers’ needs. In her words, the return of more regular bus services:

*“would make a bit of a difference – but a bus service, even the best in the world, unless you’re in a town with regular buses, it isn’t going to drop you off at an appointment at the right time, is it? You’re always gonna have to get there very early. And then have to hang around for another bus to get back”.*

Interviewees would also negatively compare the NHS’ patient transport service to community transport. One volunteer car scheme interviewee shared: “The NHS. It could take a day by the time they’ve gone and picked up all around the houses, and dropped them off, and at the end of the day wait until the ambulance picks them up and takes them home”.

Clearly, there are ways in which community transport better meets the needs of the people they assist than buses or the NHS’s patient transport service. This is perhaps unsurprising, as these schemes respond to local needs in a care-full manner that involves identifying community members’ many holistic needs, coordinating a response to these needs, and providing the labour required to meet these needs (Ravensbergen and Schwanen, 2024b). Community transport also better responds to local needs because it is more aligned with automobility than buses or NHS patient transport services. This is particularly the case for volunteer car schemes, which give people lifts in volunteers’ personal vehicles. And, indeed, a relative shift towards voluntary car sharing seems to be occurring within the community transport sector, at least in Oxfordshire.<sup>1</sup> Nationally, volunteer car sharing schemes are a more common service than community minibuses, offered by 41 % and 24 % of community transport organizations, respectively (Community Transport Association, 2024). Across the full set interviews, we noticed increasing demand for, and pressure on, voluntary car sharing but declining demand for community buses. Operators of the latter remarked that “the other challenge is a lack of passengers” and “as we lose older passengers they are not being replaced in significant numbers,” with some worrying they were no longer ‘relevant’. One could interpret this shift toward car sharing as rural communities re-thinking the role of the private car towards a shared model. More likely, this shift suggests that the challenges of rural transport provision are not limited to financial cuts but also reflect automobility reinforcing itself in the UK’s rural areas. Indeed, suburbanization and bus service reduction emerged from the interviews as the primary processes reinforcing private car use and hindering usage of any alternative modes. As already suggested, automobility has come to justify the roll-back of rural transport provision.

### 5.1. Reduced bus service reinforces car dependence

*“Why would I have a bus pass? No bus service!”* – Community Minibus Coordinator in an Oxfordshire District

The bus funding cuts are embedded within a hegemonic

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, we are unable to offer quantitative evidence in support of this claim. This should be prioritized in follow-up research.

automobility system reinforcing itself at the expense of a shrinking bus system. Service reductions tend to make the bus schedule so infrequent and inconvenient that people opt to drive, resulting in even fewer bus passengers. This downward spiral – intensified and accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic – makes further funding cuts and service reductions ‘rational’ and ‘logical’. Hence, as one participant shared:

*“I mean, I don’t know how many buses we have a day now, actually, but we don’t have many and they have been cut back. So, if you want to go into [nearby town], you’re having to go in early and then not get back until late. It’s not an easy option really. Especially not if you’re tied to a time.”* (Rural Volunteer Car Scheme Driver)

The remaining bus services tend to connect towns to Oxford. Though these services are generally seen as satisfactory (i.e., high frequency, relatively direct), getting to any town or village that is not on an Oxford route can be difficult. One volunteer driver shared “Well, we have a good bus service from Oxford to [names town] every half an hour in each direction. That’s pretty good, but very limited into the surrounding villages and to be able to get to hospital.” Many of the people relying on those dwindling bus services have resorted, or are resorting, to community transport.

### 5.2. The suburbanization of Oxfordshire

*“There is a development here [points to periphery of town on a map]. And a new big development here [points to another area outside of town on a map]”* – Community Minibus Coordinator in an Oxfordshire Town

Another process that has further entrenched automobility in the UK’s rural areas is decentralization or suburbanization. Interviewees noted how new housing and shopping developments tend to be taking place outside of the center of town, around built environments that encourage car use. Consider this minibus driver who noted:

*“The doctor’s surgery used to be in the center of town, but about five years ago they moved down to a purpose-built place – which is superb and modern, and all the rest of it – but it is a mile out of town up a steep hill. Not the best decision for older people.”*

The cumulative outcome is a decentralization of the town and increasing difficulties for those without car access:

*“That’s where people want to go. Tesco’s [the new superstore complex along the main road on the way into town]. And they used to go to the marketplace. The marketplace used to be the center of town [...] Because once they built Tesco’s – we had a supermarket in the center of the town. That closed. There used to be used to be a greengrocer, a fish shop – there were all sorts of shops in the center of the town. All of those are gone.”* (Community Minibus Coordinator in an Oxfordshire Town)

This quotation suggests how suburbanization is one of the ways in which automobility reconfigures space-time to its own advantage (Urry, 2004). The consequence is that the dense, human-scale center of town no longer has destinations important to older people. They are now forced to go to locations that are more easily accessible by car, while the “older people who do not drive-they’re completely reliant [on community transport]” (Community Minibus Driver and Coordinator Operating in a Town).

Suburbanization increases physical distances to both destinations and homes. For instance, interviewees noted how poorly served residential suburban areas were:

*“But to be quite honest most of the people that use our services aren’t really near enough to a bus to get on one. Because in some parts of the suburbs of [names town] it can take someone 20 minutes to walk to a bus stop (laughs)”* (Volunteer Car Scheme Driver Operating in a Town).

The shift toward more decentralized and suburban development for

both homes and amenities, has further widened gaps in access among those with car access and those without, while making efficient provision of collective transport such as buses more difficult. These tendencies reinforce community transport as the ‘solution’ for those without car access.

### 5.3. A car-based solution to the externalities of automobility

*“I think Oxford city is very anti-car”* – Rural Volunteer Car Scheme Driver

Perhaps the starkest evidence that community transport has been rolled out as a car-based ‘solution’ to neoliberal roll-back in an increasingly car-centric context is how community transport schemes struggle to survive in the one place attempting to curb automobility: the City of Oxford. In fact, only three schemes ran in the City of Oxford in 2022, and two have shut down since. This is partially explained by the difficulty of driving in Oxford compared to towns and villages, as well as the difficulty in recruiting urban volunteers with their own personal vehicle. One driver in a local community minibus scheme, which was shutting down at the time of the interview, directly blamed anti-car/pro-active travel interventions in Oxford for making their service difficult to run: *“And nowadays it’s becoming more difficult with driving through Oxford City because of the LTNs [Low Traffic Neighbourhoods] and the bus gates”*. LTNs have been implemented across England. In Oxford, they are residential areas where traffic filters are deployed to ward off through traffic by car while giving free access to walking, cycling and wheeling; in most cases local residents can access their dwelling by car (Dudley et al., 2022). Bus gates are street sections that are only accessible to buses, other motorised authorised vehicles, (e-)bikes and legal e-scooters. Some already exist but the authorities are in the process of installing more on major roads across town to discourage car use, make buses more reliable, and cycling and wheeling safer.

Rural schemes were also aware of how much more difficult it would be to run in the city. For instance, a volunteer car scheme driver shared:

*“Oxford City is very anti-car. So, they make it incredibly difficult. You know, with all the new traffic regulations stopping cars driving around certain streets, getting places must be much more difficult. And parking outside people’s houses. Because, you know, there’s not so much residents parking. [...] Of course, in towns and villages, there’s less parking restrictions.”*

Some village-based car schemes even refuse to drive into to Oxford destinations:

*“You know, they [volunteer drivers] got a bit fed up with that. And the traffic. The parking and the traffic. So we have kept it to local places, and suggested if people are doing that [needing a lift to an Oxford-based hospital], that they request transport. I think that if it was a lot easier for people to take people in and be able to, they probably would do it.”* (Rural Volunteer Car Scheme Driver)

The divergence in policy directions between the city of Oxford and the rural hinterland disadvantages a particularly vulnerable group of older rural residents whose perspectives and mobility needs are seldom, if at all, foregrounded in policy discourse and popular debate. These are older people in Oxfordshire’s rural areas who lack access to a car, bus and community transport minibus but occasionally need or want to travel into the city, for instance for medical appointments. They are likely to be excluded completely from trips into Oxford for social or leisure motives.

## 6. Conclusion: what role should the community sector play?

*“It’s such a big ask for a volunteer.”* – Employee of an Organization that Supports Community Transport

Community transport is not able to satisfy all mobility needs, but it is

“vital” and can offer a “lifeline” to many people, most of whom are older, isolated, live rurally, and have few or no other options to undertake essential trips. In this way it helps to address certain manifestations of rural transport poverty. However, through tracing our discomfort, we show in this paper how community transport has been rolled out as a response to neoliberal roll-back of rural transport provision, often in a car-based form that operates under neoliberal logics and further reinforces automobility. Community transport, in turn, is also not immune to neoliberal roll-back through funding cuts. Better understanding the causes of rural transport poverty raises important questions about the role of the community sector in responding to this challenge.

Indeed, for decades it has been noted in the literature that the term ‘community’ has been and continues to be used to justify a wide range of political positions, policies, and practices (Aiken et al., 2017; Mayo, 1994; Shaw, 2008; Stacey, 1969). In this paper, we have shown that community transport emerged when members of the community took it upon themselves to fill a “void,” i.e., a need for transport that emerged amongst those left out by the system of automobility through the neoliberal roll-back of bus and NHS patient transport services. Here, our concern is that community transport ultimately works as a sticking plaster. It covers up the wounds created by neoliberalism, bus funding cuts and automobility as self-reinforcing and hegemonic, and the well-intended care and attentiveness of community transport operators protect vulnerable rural residents with unfulfilled mobility needs from total immobilization. It cannot, however, heal the wounds because it does not address the processes that created the void in the first place.

A generous reading of the part played by community transport foregrounds its duplicity: as a tactic rather than a strategy (De Certeau, 1988), it subverts automobility by feeding off it and exploiting the slack automobility inevitably generates in the form of cars sitting idle on driveways and streets for most of the time. Yet, that reading disregards the voluntary nature of the efforts of most people involved in community transport. This is not so much a call for adequate financial remuneration of time and compensation of incurrent costs. Although adequate remuneration is indeed needed in certain situations encountered in fieldwork (Ravensbergen and Schwanen, 2024a,b), we recognize that efforts can be reciprocated in many different non- or more-than-capitalist economic practices (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski, 2020). It is first and foremost a calling out of the – in our view – unfair and parasitic manner in which the neoliberalization of rural transport provision takes advantage of some people, who are attentive and respond to mobility needs in the community and act accordingly, ‘investing’ their resources as ‘good’ members of the local community. In other words, it is caring neoliberal subjects who keep community transport afloat and by absorbing the bulk of the costs of service provision – unintentionally – enable the calculative public sector officials and commercial bus operators who implement, or resign themselves to, the roll-back/roll-out dynamics of bus and community transport provisions laid out above.

Shaw (2008) notes how the community sector tends to act in ways which either ‘reconcile people to their world’ or ‘remake the world’. In its current form, community transport in Oxfordshire – and probably elsewhere in England, if not beyond – tends to reconcile people to their world: these schemes aim to include older people into society without challenging the power-laden systems that excluded them in the first place. Yet our research has also made us believe that community transport can become a force of dissent: it could provide a lens through which current unequal social structures are scrutinized and find ways to offer older people living rurally access to all the people and places – beyond healthcare and other facilities fulfilling basic needs – that enable them to lead a full and worthwhile life.

Although this research focused on one English county, the austerity measures (funding cuts to bus services and NHS patient transport) and the automobility-related processes of increased reliance on private vehicles as bus services are reduced and suburbanization occurs are common across the UK. It is likely that community transport is acting as a sticking plaster to these systemic issues across the country. Further,

similar schemes may be performing the same role in other international contexts. Future research on community transport in other parts of the UK, and beyond, is needed. Participatory research methods can play a significant role in this, but broader politico-economic changes will ultimately be more important. The UK's new Labour government, elected to office in June 2024, has so far offered mixed signals. The return of the power to run bus services to local authorities is encouraging but may turn out to be a Trojan Horse if a cost effectiveness calculus and disposition to cut budgets are entrenched by a renewed push for austerity. Uncertainty will likely remain for some time. Our discomfort may therefore linger, but should not, and will not, prevent us from arguing in favour of both public buses and adequately resourced community transport in Oxfordshire and beyond.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Léa Ravensbergen:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Tim Schwanen:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

### Use of AI

No generative artificial intelligence (AI) was used in any capacity in any part of this work.

### Declaration of competing interest

None.

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### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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