

Commonwheels

Benefitting drivers and the environment

Commonwheels car club CIC, based in Durham city centre, County Durham, is one of a new breed of social enterprise making it easier for people to live a green lifestyle. It aims to provide hire cars in areas other than just the big UK cities. It is also the only car club which allows members to offer their own vehicles as hire cars – enabling the objective of providing cars in lesser populated areas to be fulfilled.



There are around 20 car clubs in the UK. However, offering members of the car club the chance to provide their own car is a scheme which Commonwheels are able to say is unique. The company aims to be able to provide the same services as bigger, privately run businesses - for example, being able to offer 24 hour services. Commonwheels is also accredited with CarPlus – a national charity which endorses the responsible use of cars, and promotes the use and benefits of car clubs nationally.

Head office for the business is based in Durham, working on the co-ordination of an expanding national network. Commonwheels currently offers cars in around 13 different locations in the UK, from Durham to Norfolk – but the number is constantly growing. One of the objectives of the business is to encourage local groups to develop car clubs; members could therefore create availability in more remote areas or simply areas outside of cities through offering their car as part of the scheme, another feature which most city based car clubs are unable to offer. The company is looking to continue the development of its car clubs in several new locations, having had Gloucester recently confirmed. Whilst the cars available are currently a mix of company owned and members' cars, Commonwheels are looking to place more emphasis on their member scheme, which could really boost availability of cars to new and existing members. The ongoing aim is to continue to expand the network, as well as develop existing locations. Now that Commonwheels is a national network, it is able to offer a presence in many more useful locations throughout the country.

One of the advantages of running a car club such as Commonwheels is its positive effect on the environment. Whilst the aim is to enable car club members to have a booked car available to them as quickly as possible, members need to make a conscious decision about whether or not to hire a car – cutting down on the amount of vehicles on the road. This encourages a more conscientious approach to car use for members, enabling them to live a greener lifestyle by co-operating and sharing resources.

The concept of Commonwheels is relatively simple. Members pay a one-off joining fee, and after this are able to hire cars via phone or the website for as long as they require it for. They are able to offer the hiring service 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Booking in advance is preferred as a greater availability is possible, but members are also able to book literally to the last minute. Cars are parked in bays throughout the locations available, and members are directed to the car they have booked. In addition to the cars owned by Commonwheels, members are also able to make their vehicles available to the business – Commonwheels takes on the running costs of the car as well as hiring it out, and the member is able to drive it for free.

The car club concept which Commonwheels is promoting can be hugely financially beneficial for those involved – saving hundreds or even thousands for members choosing only to utilise a car when necessary, rather than paying running costs on owning a car even when it is not in use. Paul Balmont, MD of Commonwheels, explains, “We’re not trying to get everybody to give up their cars – a car club is not necessarily ideal for everybody on a day-to-day basis. However, cutting car use by even 20% would make a huge difference on the roads.”

Originally two separate companies named Commonwheels and Option C, Commonwheels is now a merged business. Option C was a car club based in the North East, set up in Durham in 2007. Commonwheels was formed in 2008, offering cars mainly in Leeds and the South of England. The two companies merged in late 2009, with equal directorship for both companies. Paul Balmont, the MD of Option C, is now the managing director for the merged Commonwheels car club. He set up Option C as an answer to people in a similar situation to himself: preferring to use cars on a minimal, need-only basis. Upon researching car clubs and their benefits, he set Option C up with the aim of making car clubs accessible to members across the country in lower populated areas.

The business is a CIC (Community Interest Company) and has an asset lock, meaning that it exists for community purposes and its assets and profits are dedicated to these purposes. Commonwheels employs five full time workers and one part time, three of which are based in the north east. There is also a board of directors which includes two founding directors. Commonwheels also benefits from the help of volunteers – most of whom are members of the car club – who help to look after the cars and carry out leaflet dropping. Whilst strategic decisions are carried out by the board of directors, Commonwheels also likes to involve staff and members of the club when it can – asking for their opinions and preferences on what types of cars to purchase, for example, as well as where may be ideal locations to add into the network.

Commonwheels was funded by the Social Enterprise Loan Fund which contributed to the set up and development of the car club. The business is working towards being self sustainable, looking to move away from loan based finance - encouraging ethical investments such as community capital from members reinvesting in the business. The initial help received for setting up was as minimal as possible – Paul Balmont, the MD of the merged Commonwheels company, has a background in business support, and was able to apply this knowledge when setting up what was originally Option C.

Looking towards the future for Commonwheels, the company is currently applying for significant investment to enable further proactivity investing in new locations for the car club. The club is now approaching 1000 members, and its overall aim for self sustainability could be a reality sooner rather than later with its rapidly expanding network.

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