

WATBus

Community transport enterprise tackling issues of social isolation and accessibility

WATBus, a Northumberland based social enterprise with registered charity status, operates a fleet of 12 minibuses with wheelchair access serving Northumberland, Newcastle and Gateshead and North and South Tyneside. In operation since 1998, the community transport enterprise was created with the aim of providing a service to all community and voluntary groups and individuals who are unable to access public forms of transport due to isolation, disability or cost.



A WATBus minibus

WATBus started out with just two minibuses back in 1998 but has since rapidly expanded, increasing its fleet over the years. The purchase of two minibuses in September of 2008 completed the social enterprise's 12-strong fleet which provides a service which offers cost effective pricing for groups and individuals, a door-to-door pick up service and specialised vehicles for all disabilities with enhanced CRB checked drivers for all work with vulnerable adults and young children. WATBus now benefits on average over 36,000 people who regularly use its service and travels in excess of 90,000 miles a year.

Volunteering

Volunteering is crucial to the operation of the business, with volunteer drivers delivering the service since the formation of the enterprise. The enterprise's volunteer base has increased significantly and WATBus now has a total of 22 volunteer staff which includes Trustees, drivers, passenger assistants and administration staff. The volunteer force is complimented by a full-time trainer/administrator, recruited in April 2009 to cope with the growth of the enterprise. The recruitment of a 'shared' Business Development Officer to promote the sales and marketing side of the business has strengthened the organisation, increasing business by at least 20%.

Driver Training

WATBus also delivers driver and passenger assistance training to MiDAS (Minibus Driver Awareness Scheme) nationally accredited standard recognised through the Community Transport Association (CTA). The MiDAS training service has proved beneficial for the organisation, increasing the recruitment of local volunteers who now contribute approximately 210 volunteer hours per week.

In 2009, WATBus received funding for 'free of charge' MiDAS driver training through sponsorship money to all voluntary and community groups which has seen a huge increase in 'self-drive' hire. The MiDAS driver training service also provides potential employment opportunities. WATBus has liaised with Wansbeck CVS to provide New Deal placements, and last year 3 people found employment after the social enterprise helped to provide placements in the Wansbeck area.

As with its work with Wansbeck CVS, WATBus believes wholly in developing relationships and doing business within the third sector. WATBus works in partnership with local organisations to help deliver customers and clients to various activities and uses local companies to produce all marketing and promotional materials. WATBus has found its relationship with Social Enterprise Northumberland

(SEN) particularly helpful. In mid 2008, the social enterprise was heavily reliant on grant funding but with SEN's help, alongside creating a clear marketing strategy, advertising and creating promotional specials such as weekend deals for group bookings, WATBus has overcome its grant dependency and is well on its way to becoming self-sustainable.



A group of cyclists on a WATBike organised cycle trip

WATBus is set to further succeed with its new organised cycle trip service WATBike. After successful pilots, WATBike was officially launched in February 2010. By linking up the WATBus minibuses with bicycle trailers, WATBike aims to provide easier access to Northumberland's 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty'. The WATBike initiative also aims to address environmental issues by encouraging cyclists to travel in groups thus reducing vehicle emissions. The income generated by the WATBike initiative will further enable WATBus to continue to achieve its core aim of providing solutions to social isolation and inaccessibility whilst strengthening its status as a self-sustainable social enterprise.

Contact

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To enquire about WATBike cycle trips email cycling@watbus.org.uk

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