

Sandness Inter-Community Bus Project

April 2025

Introduction

Sandness Community Development (SCD) delivered a pilot project running an inter-community bus between the west Shetland communities of Sandness, Walls and Aith, between November 2025 and March 2026. This report outlines the scope of the project and its impact for the service users. It briefly discusses some of the considerations for continuing the service and recommends further opportunities are explored.

Background

Sandness Community Development Ltd. works with, and on behalf of, the community to encourage and support participation in decision making, maintaining services, creating and delivery of projects that improve life in our remote rural community.

The public bus service to the far west mainland of Shetland is limited, with just 5 buses daily, Monday to Friday, to and from Walls to Lerwick. A feeder bus runs to and from Sandness to meet the Lerwick bus, 3 times a day. There is an additional dial a ride service two days a week. There are no buses to Sandness after 6pm and no service on a Sunday.

In 2022 a community consultation identified a lack of transport as an issue for residents. The need for transport to after-school activities was also identified by the 'A Place in Childhood' project in their 'Children's Living Well Locally Plans for the Westside, Shetland', 2023. Information from both consultations was used to inform the Sandness Community Development Plan, and the provision of transport that meets residents needs was written into the 2023-26 ambitions.

In 2024 SCD was awarded £10,292 from the Shetland Islands Council Community Led Local Development (CLLD) fund to undertake a pilot project providing a variety of bus runs for Sandness residents between November 2024 and March 2025.

The project

Aim

To provide transport for Sandness and Walls community residents to access a variety of activities taking place in other Westside communities, and beyond, not accessible by existing bus services or timetabling.

The project would provide a minibus to:

- Transport primary school age children from Sandness and Walls to after-school swimming lessons, or other sports activities, in Aith
- Transport young people from Sandness and Walls to evening youth club sessions in Bixter
- Transport older people, or those without personal transport from Sandness to Lerwick for shopping or other services
- Transport community residents to Lerwick, or other locations, for evening cultural events reducing the need for multiple car journeys.

The pilot project was designed to provide additional information on the need for, and likely uptake of, bus services running between the westside communities of Walls, Bixter and Aith, for young people. It would also demonstrate the potential for community bus services for shopping and leisure activities, particularly for those without personal transport or the elderly.

The Walls community was included in the project to increase passenger numbers and help support transport needs of the nearest community to Sandness, affected by similarly reduced public bus service.

Activities

The grant funding was used to hire a local bus company, A & K Transport, to provide the minibuss service. During term time the bus ran on Mondays and Wednesdays after school to take the children to swimming lessons at the Westside Leisure Centre in Aith.

As a result of staff shortages the Westside Youth Club did not go ahead and the funds were used for additional runs to Basketball classes at the Leisure Centre on a Saturday. An additional run for the Aith Junior High school Christmas party was also provided.

Shopper buses were offered on alternate Thursday and Saturday afternoons.

Events buses were offered on a monthly basis for cultural events on Saturday and Sunday afternoons and evenings.

Fares were charged at a rate of £1 per adult and 50 pence per child to contribute to the match funding element of the grant.

Journeys and bus use

Throughout the four months of operation there were:

- 33 afterschool activity bus journeys
- 13 basketball journeys
- 1 young person's School Christmas party journey
- 3 shopper bus runs
- 6 events bus runs

The afterschool activity bus run was used by 12-15 primary school age children from Sandness and Walls each week, and the basketball run was regularly used by four Sandness young people aged 10-14 years. Some planned youth activity buses were cancelled due to school, or Leisure Centre closure, illness of staff running activities, or no young people using the organised bus run. To fit in with the bus hire company's schedule, pupils were collected from school just before the end of the school day.

Twenty two young people of secondary school age used the bus arranged for Aith Junior High school Christmas party.

Shopper buses were less well used, with only 1 or 2 using the bus. More buses were cancelled than used for the trip into Lerwick, with just 3 of the 10 intended journeys carrying passengers.

Events buses saw similarly low numbers of between 1 and 5, except for the Christmas carol event attended by adults and children bringing passenger numbers up to 9. All events buses were also offered to residents of Walls, however, uptake was for the Christmas carol event only.

Project impact

Bus use

Throughout the four month period of the pilot project the bus services was used by 27 families for:

- Afterschool activities; 9 families for a total of 15 primary school aged children
- Saturday basketball; 3 families for a total of 4 children, a mix of primary and secondary
- Aith Junior High school Christmas party: 15 families for a total of 22 secondary school aged children

The shopper buses were used by 5 adults of working age. Whilst events buses were used by a total of 21 passengers:

- 9 of working age
- 4 retired
- 5 under 18 years

Numbers included one wheelchair user, one non-driver and one adult with additional support needs.

Passengers were from both Sandness and Walls. Afterschool activity buses had a higher ratio of primary pupils from Happyhansel primary school in Walls (8) than Sandness primary pupils (5), reflecting the school roll in both areas. Basketball bus users were all Sandness residents.

All shopper bus passengers, and the majority of events bus passengers, were residents of Sandness, with only 3 Walls residents using the events bus for the Christmas Carol concert.

Income generation

Bus use raised £196.50 in fares. The remaining match funding amount of £784.36 was provided through Sandness Community Development fundraising.

Evaluation

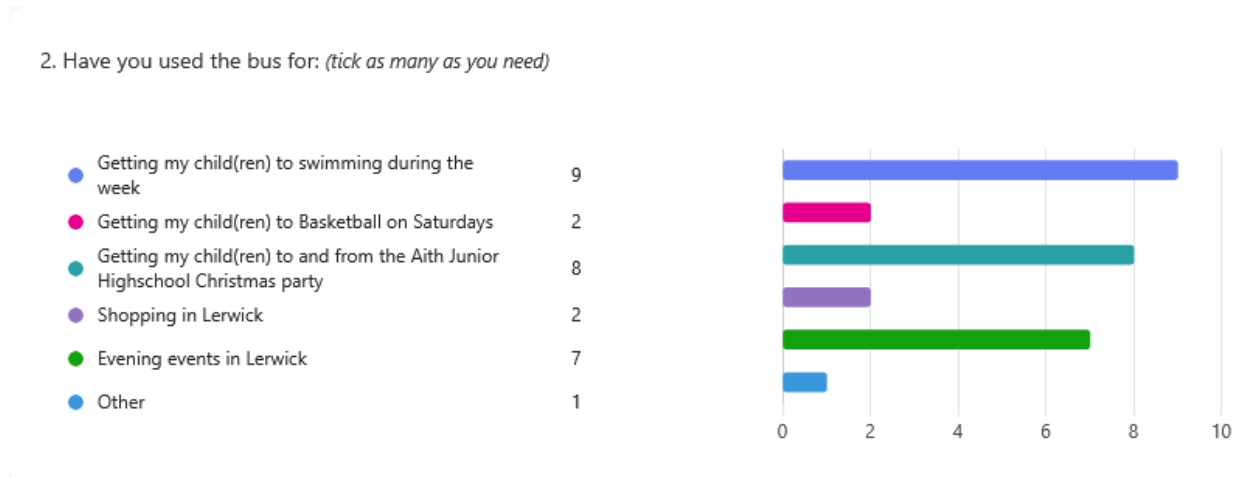
To get a sense of the usefulness of the buses for families of young people and adult passengers, an online questionnaire was created (see <https://forms.office.com/r/tMAeB7N2Xj>), and sent out via email, to a total of 37 households.

Twenty one responses were received, 11 from Sandness and 9 from Walls households.

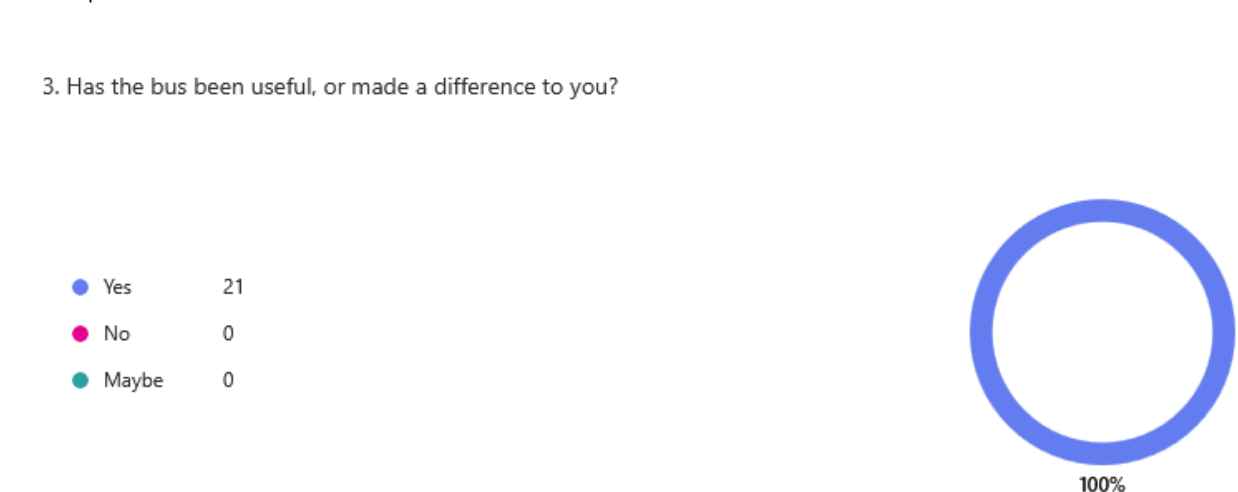
In addition, schools and parents were asked to informally consult with young people, to gain their view of the bus service.

Findings

The most frequently used buses were for young person's activities:



All respondents said the bus service had been useful to them:



After or out of school bus runs

Parents identified multiple benefits for them and their children. The bus for afterschool activities reduced the pressure on working parents and increased confidence and independence in their children:

"This has had a huge positive impact on our lives as a family. It has alleviated stress and allowed for a better work-life balance as I can now stay on at work and no longer have to catch up in evenings. It has been beneficial to my child as has given her the opportunity to develop initiative, confidence and independence"

"this has allowed me to work in either Sandness or Aith schools, which I wasn't doing before because I needed to pick up the bairns from happyhansel at 3:15 and drive to Aith. Now I can work a full school day anywhere and pick up from Aith after the activities"

The weekend basketball bus saved multiple journeys:

“The bus has been very helpful for us for basketball sessions on Saturdays. It has saved parents having to make the journey when car sharing is not always possible and/or there isn’t room in just one car for everyone. It has also given the children a sense of independence which they have appreciated.”

And the reduction in carbon footprint was also noted:

“It saved two trips to Aith and back for me which saved time and fuel and better for the environment.”

“There is a more general benefit in fewer cars and therefore a lower cost to parents as well as the lowering of carbon use.”

The project also helped the schools support parents and build closer relationships:

The bus project has been a benefit to our parents, it has been good for parent school relations showing we are willing to be flexible and take seriously their difficulties with child care. It give pupils a little independence and responsibility.

Bus journeys were appreciated by young people and have allowed more opportunity for peer socialising between primary age groups from Walls, Sandness and Aith, helping build confidence and independence:

“It is very good and makes travelling easier. Plus it is nice travelling with your friends”

“It’s good because it’s easier to get to swimming and I’m never late! And I get to see friends”

“It’s really good, and very helpful”

“The bus runs are very good. It helps us out, saves fuel and means that we can go and enjoy basketball”.

“It is great because there is no adults”

“It’s awesome!”

Shopper and events bus runs

The uptake for shopper buses was much less, with reasons given for lack of use was online shopping and supermarket deliveries, or being driven by friends and family. However, those that used the service found it helpful:

“I was having car issues, and was therefore without a vehicle. This prevented me from being able to get into town to do the shopping as easily. The bus made it so hubby and myself could get the shopping done, and they dropped us off at our house, which was much better for us”

Events buses had positive impact for those without transport and has given independence to those less able:

"As I don't drive this is a chance to attend some evening events in Lerwick"

After having my stroke I no longer drive. I rely on friends & mainly family to take me everywhere. It [the bus] has allowed me to attend films & a music event that I would otherwise not have gone to. None of my family/friends would have gone to these events & I would not have wanted to make them feel pressured to take me."

Events buses also helped reinforce community bonds:

"Made it a 'social' thing to do rather than just as an individual/couple"

Service improvements

Twenty out of the 21 respondents said they would use the bus again. One answered 'maybe' and said they would use the bus if the household car was out of use.

There was no criticism of the young people's afterschool or Saturday activities service, or negative comments from parents. When asked for improvements to the service, most made no comment, or said no changes were needed. Happyhansel and Sandness primary schools would like the timing of collection from the schools to be slightly later than has been timetabled.

Suggestions for future development or other types of bus runs

All parents of primary school aged children would like to see the service continue. Parents would also like a late return from Aith for young people, to get older children home from secondary afterschool activities. A feeder bus to link with the lunchtime Walls-Lerwick buses either at the weekend, or in the holidays was requested. Parents would also like a bus run for the Westside youth club, if it goes ahead in the winter, and thought bus runs to big events in town for children would be very useful.

For shopper buses, one respondent suggested the timetabling of the bus run to be flexible and not set on certain days, to avoid clashes with other personal activities. There were also comments about the lack of people using the service and the need to improve the existing public bus service.

Suggestions for events buses included:

"Local shows [Westside], musical events, films"

"Meals out - not necessarily Lerwick, could be Busta House, Maryfield, Burrastow, Scalloway Hotel"

"Outings to places for nature walks which cannot be reached by public transport."

"[bus runs] specially for elderly/handicapped people some outing to a café might be welcome."

Other suggestions for streamlining the service were:

- a dedicated place to find out information on bus runs
- an online booking service
- an ongoing feedback and suggestions facility, or way to request bus runs

Ongoing service

The young person's afterschool bus to access afterschool activities at the Westside Leisure Centre will continue to run to the end of March 2026. The service has been further funded by the Early Adopter Communities Fund, working directly with Happyhansel and Sandness primary schools.

Discussion

The project has clearly demonstrated a need for transport between westside communities for primary school pupils to access after/out of school activities. The bus provision has enabled parents to work longer hours and for more days, significantly reducing the stress of juggling childcare. It reduced car use and therefore carbon emissions. Parent's comments also suggest that similar transport for older children to return home at a later time would be beneficial to help manage family time in the evenings.

It has given opportunity for young people to become more independent, mix with a wider social group and increased their confidence for future socialising at high school.

Uptake of the shopper bus, showed much less need with modern delivery options filling the gap.

Event bus use and the ideas for future use suggest, with the right programme, events supported by transport could become popular with the community.

Whether or not to provide transport to support remote rural communities on the westside of Shetland is not a simple decision. Despite the pilot project there are still a number of issues to be resolved, not least the question of how to make the service economically viable.

Whilst, given current funding streams, it might be possible to access grants to purchase a community vehicle, there is no ongoing, long term option for revenue funding to subsidise the operation of a service. Bus fares alone would not cover ongoing running costs, or support the additional safety and servicing required on vehicles for the carriage of passengers.

In addition, without the potential to employ drivers, sufficient volunteers, trained and holding the required valid licences would need to commit to the service. Ongoing planning and coordination would be needed, again on a voluntary basis, if no administrator could be funded.

Continued hiring of buses from the local bus company could be considered. This would remove the issue of a Sandness Community Development community bus taking business away from a local firm, or risking rivalry. However, this would only be feasible if external funding could be found, particularly on a long term, ongoing basis.

A smaller vehicle, up to 8 seats, operating as a taxi, could provide a service without the need to meet the additional legislation requirements of bigger, passenger carrying vehicles. There are also options for using a smaller vehicle as part of a car club, which would increase opportunity for use and income generation.

There is no doubt that additional transport would be beneficial for both the Sandness and Walls communities. More exploration of possibilities should be undertaken, including funding opportunities, operational alternatives and influencing additional provision of the existing public bus service.

Financial information

Expenditure	£
Bus hire	11,082.00
Income	
CLLD grant	10,101.14
Bus fares	201.50
SCD contribution	779.36
Total	11,082.00

Sandness Community Development April 2025.