Gippsland Community e-Bus Pilot:

A case study of community-led transport in Venus Bay and Sandy Point

VENUS BAY COMMUNITY CENTRE

iMOVE

LA TROBE UNIVERSITY | Centre for Technology Infusion

Sandy Point E-BUS
Powered by community volunteers

Supported by
VICTORIA State Government | Department of Transport and Planning

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The project would not have been possible without the energy, insight, and generosity of the communities of Venus Bay and Sandy Point, whose participation and dedication were central to the success of this project. This report reflects their shared effort to improve mobility and inclusion in regional Victoria.

A full list of all who contributed to this project is provided in Appendix A.

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Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Glossary

A

ABS
Australian Bureau of Statistics

ACTA
Australian Community Transport Association

D

DCCEEW
Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water

DELWP
Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning

DITRDCSA
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sport and the Arts

DRT
Demand-Responsive Transport

DTP
Department of Transport and Planning (Victoria)

E

EV
Electric Vehicle

M

MaaS
Mobility as a Service

N

NDIS
National Disability Insurance Scheme

S

SPBMC
Sandy Point Bus Management Committee

STV
Safe Transport Victoria

V

VBCC
Venus Bay Community Centre

V/Line
Victorian regional public transport operator

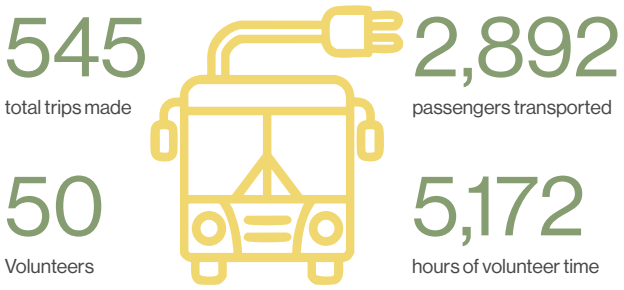
VTCTA
Victoria Tasmania Community Transport Association

Executive Summary

The Gippsland Community e-Bus Pilot trialled and then evaluated whether small, community-managed electric buses could provide practical, inclusive and sustainable transport for residents of two communities in South Gippsland, Venus Bay and Sandy Point. Both towns have no public transport and very limited alternatives, which restricts access to health care, shopping, social connection and regional services. The pilot was delivered through a partnership between the Department of Transport and Planning, the Venus Bay Community Centre, the Sandy Point community, La Trobe University, and iMOVE.

Over two years the project examined how an electric vehicle, volunteer-led operations, and community governance could work together to meet local mobility needs. The research included surveys, operational data, interviews and focus groups.

The evaluation shows that community-run electric transport is feasible, highly valued and delivers strong social outcomes, with additional economic and environmental benefits, when supported by effective local organisation and appropriate resources.



> *A total of 545 trips were made, transporting 2,892 passengers. This was only possible through the involvement of more than 50 volunteers across the two communities who provided a total of 5,172 hours of their time to ensure transport was provided to anyone who needed or wanted it.*

Key findings

1. **The pilot established a dependable and well-functioning transport service where none previously existed**

   Both communities successfully launched and operated a 10-seat (plus a wheelchair) electric minibus that provided regular and on-demand trips. The service offered residents consistent access to local and regional destinations. Some passengers reported they would not have travelled at all without the e-Bus, indicating that the service created new mobility opportunities in addition to replacing existing travel.

2. **Social benefits were significant**

   Residents described the service as friendly, convenient and important for staying connected. The e-Bus supported access to services, community events and V/Line connections. For older residents and people who are less able to drive, it enhanced independence and reduced isolation. Satisfaction was consistently high, with average ratings above 8.9 out of 10 in both communities.

3. **The pilot generated economic and local benefits**

   The e-Bus enabled access to important social outings which supported businesses and events in local towns, reduced travel costs, shopping in larger towns, and created new volunteering opportunities for some residents. For some households experiencing increasing costs to run their car/s, the service provided a cost-effective alternative. These benefits mirror broader evidence that community transport creates economic value not captured in traditional cost–benefit metrics.

4. **Electric vehicles performed well but required careful management**

   The electric minibuses delivered quiet, low-emission transport and were well received by passengers. However, range varied with weather, passenger load and use of heating or cooling, particularly on longer trips, leading to significant range anxiety. During the trial, both vehicles experienced unexpected mechanical and electrical issues which led to downtime whilst warranty repairs took place. Solar generation contributed to charging, although grid electricity was still required.

5. **Volunteer-led operations were effective but placed high demands on core volunteers**

   Both towns recruited volunteer drivers and administrative volunteers, with a core group regularly undertaking the driving. Managing bookings, scheduling and communications required considerable time. Volunteers were proud of the service they were providing, they consistently demonstrated their commitment to the service, often going above and beyond to meet the needs of residents and visitors to the towns. Drivers reported they enjoyed the work. Those administering the operations were conscious of the risk of burnout in all volunteers and could see the need for some paid coordination support to ensure long-term sustainability.

6. **Booking systems worked with significant manual effort**

   Most potential passengers preferred to book by phone. A variety of digital tools were explored, trialled and refined. Both communities developed different booking systems in response to community feedback, making use of readily available tools through website platforms or event booking tools, to develop simple online forms. However, these systems had to be supported by a lot of manual processes in the background, limiting scalability.

7. **Operating costs were manageable, but capital costs remain a barrier**

   Both communities were able to cover day-to-day operating expenditure through donations, grants, fundraising, and in-kind effort. Sandy Point demonstrated that, once a vehicle is available, a well-organised volunteer model can meet ongoing operational costs.However, the capital cost of acquiring or replacing a vehicle remains beyond the capacity of small communities, which aligns with evidence across Australia and internationally.

Overall impacts

The e-Bus delivered strong outcomes across both communities:

- **Social:** reduced isolation, improved wellbeing and stronger community connection
- **Economic**: support for local businesses, volunteering and cost savings for households
- **Environmental:** reduced emissions and integration with local renewable energy sources

The pilot demonstrated that, with the right organisational support, practical tools and access to an appropriate vehicle, small communities can operate low-emission transport services that improve mobility and inclusion in places where public transport is not feasible.

Recommendations

Table 1: Recommendations for Government

No.	Recommendation	Summary of Action Required
1	Develop a clear, inclusive definition of community transport	Establish a definition that reflects how community transport operates in Australia and comparable OECD settings. Position community transport as part of the broader mobility system, not a specialist welfare service, to support consistent policy, funding and planning.
2	Support place-based models and provide tools that match community capacity	Enable communities to design services that reflect local conditions, volunteer availability and organisational readiness. Provide templates, governance tools, guidance and training resources that reduce administrative burden while preserving local autonomy.
3	Develop sustainable funding approaches that reflect rural mobility realities	Recognise that rural transport rarely achieves commercial viability. Support core functions including coordination, insurance, training, reporting, and volunteer management. Provide assistance for capital costs such as accessible and low-emission vehicles. Base funding on need and social value rather than urban patronage thresholds.
4	Invest in simple and affordable digital tools for booking and scheduling	Improve access to low-cost or shared digital systems that reduce manual workload and enhance visibility of demand. Offer guidance on selecting appropriate tools. Ensure phone-based booking options remain available for communities with low digital literacy. Tools should be easy to use, low maintenance, and suitable for regional settings.

5	Simplify accreditation, compliance and reporting requirements	Review obligations to ensure they reflect small, volunteer-run operations. Provide clear, consistent requirements supported by practical materials that reduce administrative pressure and improve long-term organisational capacity.
6	Strengthen electric vehicle readiness in regional and community transport	Improve regional charging coverage and compatibility, and provide guidance on selecting suitable EV types for community transport. Support resilient charging solutions in areas with unreliable power supply. Consider incentives to reduce upfront EV costs.
7	Improve coordination between community transport and regional public transport	Strengthen alignment between community transport providers, local government, and V/Line. Improve service information, coordination processes and guidance for planning intermodal connections appropriate for low-density environments.
8	Support further pilots to build evidence on rural mobility needs and long-term service models	Fund pilots that test different service designs, sustainability models, mixed workforce approaches, vehicle types and booking systems. Evaluate broader health, social and participation outcomes. Use findings to refine state policy and identify effective models for different community contexts.

Table 2: Recommendations for communities and local organisations

No	Recommendation	Summary of Action Required
1	Build a sustainable and distributed volunteer model	Share responsibilities across multiple volunteers, establish clear expectations for each role and ensure adequate back-up capacity. Plan workloads realistically to avoid fatigue and support long-term service reliability.
2	Put in place clear organisational and operational systems	Document key procedures for bookings, scheduling, safety, training, driver management and vehicle maintenance. Clear systems reduce reliance on individual volunteers and support safe, consistent operation.
3	Communicate in ways that match community preferences	Use multiple communication channels, including phone, printed materials, email, community noticeboards and local networks, to reach residents with different levels of digital access and literacy.
4	Select vehicles suited to local conditions and driver capability	Choose vehicles based on local road conditions, typical trip distances, availability of servicing, and passenger / driver needs. For EVs, assess charging access, energy reliability and local grid capacity.
5	Apply fair and transparent pricing where appropriate	Introduce contributions that align with local socioeconomic conditions. Even modest payments can support sustainability, reinforce perceived value and help manage demand without creating barriers to access.
6	Explore opportunities to increase vehicle utilisation	Consider shared use of vehicles across community groups, charter opportunities, or supporting local events. Higher utilisation can improve cost efficiency, strengthen community benefit, and support future investment cases.
7	Maintain partnerships with local sustainability and community energy groups	Collaborate with community energy organisations, sustainability groups and local associations to strengthen operational resilience, support innovation and ensure alignment with broader community objectives.

1 Introduction

Access to transport is a critical factor in social participation, wellbeing and inclusion in regional and rural communities. Across Victoria, many small towns lack public transport, limiting residents' ability to reach health, education, employment and community services. The Gippsland Community e-Bus Pilot was established to test how community-run, electric, on-demand transport could address these challenges in two isolated coastal towns, Venus Bay and Sandy Point, where no bus, taxi or other public services currently operate.

The project builds on the Victorian State Government's Flexible Local Transport Solutions Program, which provided funding for two 12-seater electric minibuses. The pilot extends that investment by evaluating how technology, management and community participation can enable sustainable and inclusive transport in low-density areas.

1.1 Policy background

This pilot operates within a wider national and state policy environment focused on improving access and sustainability in regional transport. Australian research has identified persistent gaps in mobility provision for older people, people with disability and residents of remote towns. Recent studies, including a 2022 report by the Institute for Public Policy and Governance (IPPG), note that community transport fills essential service gaps but remains fragmented and under-recognised in transport planning.

The project aligns with state and Commonwealth priorities related to:

- Decarbonisation and electrification of transport fleets
- Social inclusion and equitable access to mobility
- Local empowerment through community-driven service design
- Evidence-based innovation supporting flexible, low-cost transport in non-metropolitan areas

1.2 Purpose of this report

This report documents the design, implementation and evaluation of the Gippsland Community e-Bus Pilot. It aims to share lessons for other regional communities and government about how small-scale, community-led mobility can operate sustainably in areas where conventional public transport is unavailable. The report draws together evidence from policy analysis, community engagement, operational data and participant feedback collected through interviews and surveys during the two-year pilot.

1.3 Project objectives

The project addresses the following overarching questions:

1. Can community-run mobility services be delivered viably and sustainably in areas where conventional public transport is not feasible?
2. What social, economic and environmental benefits can such services generate for local communities?
3. What management and operational models best support inclusive, resilient, and low-emission community transport?
4. How can insights from Venus Bay and Sandy Point inform future community transport and mobility policy in Victoria and across Australia?

1.4 Project approach

This pilot was undertaken as a two-year applied research initiative combining community-led service delivery with research evaluation. The study adopted a co-design and mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to examine how community-run, electric buses could operate sustainably in small coastal towns without existing public transport.

The research was delivered in three phases:

1. Planning and design: community engagement activities, including a baseline community survey and local workshops, were undertaken to identify transport needs and priorities in Venus Bay and Sandy Point. These informed the operational models and local implementation process.
2. Implementation and monitoring: this phase involved operating the e-Bus services in both towns. Passenger and driver satisfaction surveys and operational data were collected to monitor how the service performed. Engagement officers in each town provided regular feedback to support effective service operations.
3. Final evaluation: data collection included community surveys, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with volunteer drivers and passengers. Together, these provided insights into the outcomes of the two-year pilot.

The research also incorporated analysis of operational data collected throughout the pilot, together with review of relevant literature and policy, demographic data, and comparable community transport and on-demand mobility models.

Detailed information on the research design, data collection tools and analysis methods is provided in Appendix B – Research Methods.

1.5 Report structure

The report is organised into seven chapters:

Chapter 1

positions the pilot within its policy context and sets out the purpose, objectives and evaluation approach used in the study.

Chapter 2

outlines the evidence and policy context for community transport in Australia and internationally. It reviews the sector's development, policy and funding settings, and management and workforce considerations, and presents Australian and international case studies relevant to the Gippsland context.

Chapter 3

provides background on the Gippsland Community e-Bus Pilot. It describes the transport challenges in South Gippsland, the community and sustainability initiatives that led to the pilot, and the demographic and geographic characteristics of Venus Bay and Sandy Point. It also outlines the pilot's strategy, scope and design.

Chapter 4

explains how the pilot was implemented in practice. It details the vehicle, service design, booking system, community management arrangements, financial considerations and community engagement activities involved in establishing and operating the service.

Chapter 5

presents findings from service operations, including ridership patterns, user experience, operational models and financial sustainability. It draws together survey, interview and operational data to assess how the service functioned on a day-to-day basis.

Chapter 6

assesses the social, economic and environmental outcomes of the pilot. It evaluates the broader community impacts, including access, inclusion, participation and sustainability benefits, and synthesises the overall effects observed during the two-year trial.

Chapter 7

sets out the key learnings and recommendations arising from the pilot. It identifies implications for future transport policy and delivery, and provides practical guidance for communities and government considering locally led, low-emission mobility models.

2 Community transport: context, policy and management

Community transport in regional and rural Australia plays an essential role in reducing transport disadvantage and improving access to essential services. In towns where conventional public transport is not viable, locally managed services have evolved to meet local mobility needs, connecting residents to healthcare, education, employment and community activities. Recent studies (Victoria Tasmania Community Transport Association [VTCTA], 2024; IPPG, 2022) show that these services are typically volunteer-led and operate within fragmented policy and funding systems, yet they demonstrate the capacity of communities to design and deliver transport solutions suited to their context. The Gippsland Community e-Bus Pilot builds on this experience to test the viability and sustainability of a community-run, on-demand service in two geographically isolated towns. The following sections outline the evidence base and policy context informing this approach and review comparable models that have shaped community-led mobility practice in Australia and internationally.

2.1 Community transport in Australia

Community transport refers to locally organised, not-for-profit transport services established to meet unmet mobility needs where conventional public transport is unavailable or unsuitable. Although community-led transport initiatives had existed informally for some time, the sector's formal development is commonly traced to the funding of the Bathurst Community Bus in 1978, which is recognised as the first documented example of community transport as it is understood today (Denmark & Stevens, 2016). Subsequent research and policy reviews describe community transport as a supported and inclusive form of transport that enables access to healthcare, education, employment and social participation (IPPG, 2022; VTCTA 2024).

Community transport services are typically purpose based, volunteer supported, and community led. They operate flexible or demand responsive trips such as transport to health, shopping or social activities, using small buses or cars driven by paid staff or volunteers. While operational models differ across locations and contexts, community transport generally shares three defining features:

1. **local management, with services managed by community organisations or local councils rather than commercial operators,**
2. **a not-for-profit orientation, using available funds to maintain local transport services, and**
3. **a social purpose, prioritising access, inclusion and wellbeing over patronage or profit.**

Understanding how the sector is defined and supported also requires attention to the organisations and research bodies that shape community transport practice in Australia. Industry associations have played a central role in shaping contemporary understanding of community transport and providing much of the sector's evidence base. The Australian Community Transport Association (ACTA) advocates nationally for consistent policy, funding and regulatory settings, while the Victoria–Tasmania Community Transport Association (VTCTA), until recently, provided state-level coordination, sector development and research, including its collaboration with ACTA and the Department of Transport (DTP) on the Victorian Mapping Project in 2024. This work strengthened recognition of community transport as essential social infrastructure and has informed contemporary practice and research relevant to this study. VTCTA ceased operations in December 2024 due to sector fragmentation and a lack of resources. Since then, Victorian community transport providers can communicate sector issues to ACTA through the Victorian Special Interest Group (VSIG). The strengthening of ACTA's national role reflects the increasing consolidation of advocacy and sector development at the national level.

In terms of the evidence base, although community transport has a long history in Australia, recent academic scholarship on the topic has tended to focus on mobility behaviour, service design and economic modelling. Earlier work by Denmark and Stevens (2016) provided a comprehensive overview of the sector, noting that community transport plays a significant role in the delivery of flexible transport, bridging welfare and public transport provision, particularly in outer-regional areas where commercial services are unviable. This perspective has evolved into a broader understanding of community transport as core social infrastructure that supports equitable access to health, social and community care (IPPG, 2022). The recent VTCTA report expands this view, defining community transport as "a supported form of transport that enables people who are transport and mobility challenged to continue to access the things necessary for living in their community" (2024, p.9). It emphasises that community transport does more than provide a ride; it helps people maintain independence, connection and participation in everyday life. Framed this way, community transport operates not only as mobility service but as a form of social infrastructure that links people to opportunity, belonging and wellbeing within their communities.

Australian research (Mulley et al., 2018; 2020) highlights that community transport providers now operate in a changing mobility landscape shaped by digital booking systems and on-demand models. Many are exploring Mobility as a Service (MaaS) concepts to combine their traditional social-service role with flexible transport delivery. Despite limited resources, community transport organisations continue to demonstrate adaptability and local knowledge, developing mobility solutions that respond to the specific geographic and demographic profiles of their communities. However, research also indicates that digital platforms and MaaS approaches have produced uneven outcomes for community transport providers, particularly in regional and low-density contexts. Studies highlight that digital systems can introduce additional costs, training requirements and administrative complexity, and that MaaS does not always deliver the efficiencies anticipated for small operators with limited resources (Mulley et al., 2018; Mulley et al., 2020). Industry analyses similarly point to gaps in digital skills, tools and infrastructure across community transport providers, with many facing barriers that limit their ability to benefit fully from new platforms and systems (VTCTA, 2024).

The shift toward flexibility is reflected across the transport sector in emerging models such as Demand Responsive Transport (DRT). The term DRT has been adopted in scholarly and industry literature since the early 2000s to describe flexible, user-oriented services that adjust routes and schedules according to passenger demand rather than fixed timetables (Papanikolaou et al., 2017). Typically using smaller vehicles managed through digital booking systems, DRT operates between fixed-route public transport and individual taxi services, offering shared trips that adapt to changing demand. The principles that guide DRT, such as flexibility, local responsiveness and coordinated scheduling, reflect those already established in community transport practice but are now being advanced through digital platforms and integration with MaaS frameworks. Research shows that DRT can improve accessibility in low-density areas by linking residents to key destinations and main transport routes (Sörensen et al., 2021; Mortazavi et al., 2024). When integrated with existing networks, DRT can strengthen local connections to major transport services, as demonstrated in the BRIDJ trials in Sydney (Perera et al., 2020). Its success depends on matching service flexibility with demand, keeping costs affordable, and ensuring equitable access (Alonso-González et al., 2018). In regional and rural areas, DRT demonstrates how on-demand models can expand local mobility while supporting the social purpose central to community transport.

2.2 Transport disadvantage in regional context

Limited transport options in rural and regional areas have long been recognised as a significant barrier to social and economic participation. In the Australian context, such challenges are evident in rural and peri urban locations where public-transport access is limited and affordable mobility options are scarce, increasing the risk of transport-related social exclusion for low-income households (Currie et al., 2007). Research consistently shows that distance, low population density and the absence of viable public transport limit residents' access to employment, education, healthcare and community life (Xi et al., 2025; Pyrialakou et al., 2016). This situation is often described as transport disadvantage, i.e., a condition in which people experience restricted opportunities because of inadequate mobility infrastructure or services.

Currie and Delbosc (2011) emphasise that transport disadvantage is a multidimensional condition shaped by the interaction of land use patterns, transport-system characteristics and individual circumstances. Their review highlights that disadvantage arises not only from the absence of public transport, but also from the financial and social pressures created in car-dependent regions, including situations of 'forced' car ownership where households face mobility-related financial stress.

Australian studies emphasise that mobility is not only a practical requirement but also a foundation for wellbeing and inclusion. Stanley et al. (2019) identify mobility as a key enabler of "bridging social capital," allowing individuals to maintain relationships and participate in social and economic networks. When transport options are limited, people risk isolation, reduced service access and declining community engagement. Martens and Lucas (2018) link such outcomes to broader social-justice concerns, arguing that the ability to travel is integral to exercising full citizenship and that inequitable mobility provision constitutes a form of spatial injustice.

Within this context, community transport represents a locally grounded response to structural inequities in rural mobility. Its flexible, demand-responsive design allows small communities to overcome distance and service scarcity by organising transport around actual need rather than fixed schedules. As Xi et al. (2025) note, community-based and on-demand solutions can mitigate accessibility gaps in dispersed settlements when conventional public transport is unviable. In regions such as South Gippsland and other parts of regional Australia, small populations and seasonal travel patterns make conventional scheduled services difficult to sustain. Locally organised or hybrid transport options have been proposed as one way to maintain access to essential services and community life where commercial and public provision are limited.

Although examples of fully community-run services remain rare, recent research and policy attention suggest growing interest in models that strengthen local participation in the planning and delivery of rural mobility. This emerging focus underscores the need for clearer policy recognition and stable funding arrangements to support flexible, place-based transport initiatives in regional and remote areas.

2.3 Policy and funding frameworks

Community transport in Australia operates within a complex and fragmented policy landscape. Responsibilities for mobility and access services are shared across multiple government sectors, including aged care, disability, health, transport and local government, without a single national framework. This division of responsibilities has produced inconsistent funding programs and eligibility criteria across states and territories (IPPG, 2022; VTCTA, 2024). Although community transport provides essential mobility in areas unserved by commercial or public operators, it is often absent or poorly integrated within formal transport planning and funding frameworks (IPPG, 2022; VTCTA, 2024).

At the federal level, national strategies increasingly emphasise sustainable and equitable transport. The *Transport and Infrastructure Net Zero Roadmap and Action Plan* (Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sport and the Arts [DITRDCSA], 2025) commits the transport sector to achieving net-zero emissions by 2050 through accelerated fleet electrification and investment in enabling and charging infrastructure. *The Net Zero Plan* (Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water [DCCEEmW], 2025) reinforces these objectives by identifying transport decarbonisation as a key pathway to national emissions reduction. Both frameworks encourage collaboration between federal, state and industry partners to support the transition to low- and zero-emission fleets. These policy directions provide the broader context for initiatives such as the Gippsland Community e-Bus Pilot.

Federal policy also recognises the connection between transport and social inclusion. The Australian Government's Transport accessibility reforms emphasise improving accessibility across the network for people with disability, including through reforms to the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport announced in March 2024 (DITRDCSA, 2024). This direction aligns with the social purpose of community transport and its role in bridging gaps between social services and mainstream public transport (IPPG, 2022; VTCTA, 2024).

In Victoria, the *Flexible Local Transport Solutions Program* (Department of Transport and Planning [DTP], 2024) provides funding to local government and community organisations for small-scale transport projects in regional and remote areas, particularly where other local transport solutions do not exist. It targets projects that address transport disadvantage and promote inclusion and innovation (DTP, 2024).

Victorian policy more broadly reflects statewide commitments to decarbonisation and equitable mobility. *Victoria's Climate Change Strategy* (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning [DELWP], 2021) sets the overarching transition pathway. *The Zero Emissions Vehicle Roadmap* (DELWP, 2021) sets targets and programs for zero-emission vehicle uptake and charging rollout, including a 2030 sales target. *Victoria's Transport Accessibility Strategic Framework* (DTP, 2024) emphasises inclusive, whole-of-journey planning and improving first- and last-mile connections, including for regional communities. The *Regional Network Development Plan* (Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources [DECDJTR], 2016) highlights the role of flexible and demand-responsive services in regional towns. Collectively, these policies prioritise decarbonisation, social inclusion and local participation.

Despite these complementary strategies, the policy environment for community transport remains fragmented. As noted by IPPG (2022) and VTCTA (2024), service viability is constrained by unclear management responsibilities and short-term funding. Integrating community transport within Victoria's transport and climate frameworks, together with efforts to expand electrified fleets, wovvuld improve both sustainability and equity outcomes (IPPG, 2022; VTCTA, 2024).

Approaches across states

At the federal level, most community-transport funding flows indirectly through social-policy programs rather than transport budgets. The Aged Care and Home Care packages, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and community-health grants all include limited transport components, but eligibility is tied to individual client status rather than local mobility need. Reports note that this creates inequities: people who are ineligible for aged- or disability-funded transport may have no access to affordable services, even in areas with an identified mobility gap (VTCTA, 2024, pp. 18–20). As local governments withdraw from direct service delivery and the federal government moves funding into client-based programs, many regional providers have reported reduced coverage and greater administrative burden.

At the state and territory level, community transport is structured and funded in significantly different ways, producing an uneven policy landscape across Australia. In New South Wales, the *Community Transport Program* is managed within Transport for NSW under the *Passenger Transport Act 2014*, providing recurrent operational funding and integration with public-transport planning (Denmark & Stevens, 2016; Transport for NSW, 2024). Queensland delivers its Community Transport Program as a social services grant targeting residents under 65 who are not eligible for aged-care or disability transport support (Queensland Government, 2024). Tasmania and South Australia operate small coordination networks, while Western Australia supports community buses largely through local councils and community initiatives. Victoria has no unified community-transport program and relies mainly on local-government contributions, user fees and ad-hoc project grants (Denmark and Stevens, 2016; VTCTA, 2024). As Denmark and Stevens (2016, p. 284) note, these differences have produced a "postcode lottery" in service provision and accessibility across Australia.

Fragmentation of responsibilities and short-term funding cycles continue to undermine the sector's sustainability (IPPG, 2022; VTCTA, 2024). Funding is typically competitive and tied to specific cohorts or trip purposes, making it difficult for providers to plan long-term services or invest in new technologies. Administrative and reporting requirements differ across programs, stretching the limited capacity of volunteer-based organisations. The absence of clear governance/management responsibilities between transport and human-services agencies also limits opportunities for integration with public-transport planning and infrastructure investment.

A further challenge is that community transport remains marginal in transport-planning frameworks. While policy documents acknowledge the importance of equitable access, community transport is often treated as supplementary welfare transport rather than as part of a multimodal system. Mulley et al. (2018, 2020) argue that recognising community transport as an integral element of flexible transport could improve coordination with emerging on-demand and Mobility-as-a-Service models. Without such recognition, it risks continuing as an under-resourced patch in the transport network despite its demonstrated social value.

Recent reports call for a more coherent national approach (IPPG, 2022; VTCTA, 2024). Recommendations include establishing consistent baseline funding, streamlined reporting and clearer policy responsibility between levels of government. These reforms would move the sector from a reactive, program-driven model toward a stable service platform capable of innovation and coordination with mainstream and on-demand transport.

2.4 Impacts of community transport

Community transport plays a recognised role in supporting inclusion, mobility and wellbeing, particularly in regional and rural areas where conventional public transport is limited. Research consistently highlights three broad domains through which community transport can generate benefits: social, economic and environmental (Canning et al., 2015; IPPG, 2022; Nelson et al., 2017).

Social impacts relate to the ways transport enables people to participate in daily life. Access to mobility supports social interaction, community engagement and overall quality of life, particularly for older adults, people with disabilities and individuals on low incomes (Lucas & Jones, 2012). In regions where residents rely heavily on private vehicles, limited transport options can contribute to transport related social exclusion, where people are unable to reach essential services, employment, education or social activities (Yigitcanlar et al., 2019). Community transport can reduce these barriers by providing flexible and locally adapted services that respond to community needs.

Economic impacts arise when transport improves access to services, employment and local businesses. Affordable and reliable transport can reduce the financial burden of travel for households without private vehicles, support participation in the workforce and help connect residents to regional services. Community transport can also contribute to the visitor economy by supporting access to local attractions, which can help stimulate small businesses and strengthen local resilience (Nelson et al., 2017).

Environmental impacts reflect the role of transport in shaping emissions and energy use. Community transport reduces the number of single occupant car trips and can lower congestion and fuel consumption, especially in regional areas with high car dependency. The introduction of electric vehicles offers further potential to reduce emissions and align transport with broader sustainability objectives and community level renewable energy initiatives (IPPG, 2022).

These impact domains provide a useful framework for understanding the potential value of community transport systems and the outcomes that can arise when tailored services are introduced in areas with limited or no public transport. They also offer a conceptual foundation for assessing the benefits of new approaches, such as the community operated electric vehicle model trialled in this pilot.

2.5 Understanding the value and costs of community transport

The sustainability of community transport depends not only on policy and funding frameworks but also on the capacity of local organisations to deliver services safely and consistently. Across Australia, most community transport is operated by small not-for-profit organisations, incorporated associations or local-council auspices rather than formal public-transport agencies (Denmark and Stevens, 2016; VTCTA, 2024). Management arrangements therefore vary widely. Some providers rely on volunteer-run committees, while others employ part-time coordinators or contract drivers. This diversity allows flexibility and local responsiveness but also produces administrative complexity. Providers must meet multiple regulatory and compliance requirements such as vehicle accreditation, insurance, volunteer screening, reporting to funders and occupational-health standards, often without dedicated administrative staff (IPPG, 2022).

Volunteer participation remains a defining feature of the sector. Volunteers undertake essential roles such as driving, scheduling and client support, providing substantial in-kind labour that keeps services viable (VTCTA, 2024). Yet the volunteer workforce faces persistent challenges, including ageing membership, increasing training and safety obligations the growing demands associated with administrative processes. Reliance on unpaid labour limits the capacity of services to expand or operate at consistent frequency, particularly in regions with declining populations (Denmark and Stevens, 2016; IPPG, 2022). Recent sector analyses recommend transitioning to mixed-workforce models that combine volunteers with paid coordinators to ensure continuity and compliance (VTCTA, 2024).

These management and workforce pressures are closely connected to how community transport is valued and funded. Traditional cost–benefit analysis tends to focus on direct operating costs while overlooking broader social benefits such as improved inclusion, independence and community resilience (Lowe et al., 2018). However, research shows that individuals at risk of social exclusion gain significant value from increased mobility (Stanley, 2011; 2017). Social exclusion is shaped by factors such as low income, unemployment or limited social support, and is intensified in geographically isolated settings.

The economic value of providing mobility to people at risk of exclusion has been estimated at approximately AUD 20 per additional trip in 2008 prices, equivalent to around AUD 30 today (Lowe et al., 2018). This reflects the wider social return associated with improved access to education, healthcare, social activities and employment. Although these benefits rarely appear in conventional financial models, they contribute to social cohesion, community resilience and reduced long-term health and care costs. Incorporating such benefits into cost–benefit analysis and policy decisions is essential for recognising the full contribution of community transport to community wellbeing.

Recent reform work in the community transport sector shows that the previous flat per trip subsidy under the Commonwealth Home Support Programme did not reflect the real cost of delivering services, particularly in regional, remote and thin-market areas (ACTA, 2025; IPPG, 2022). Evidence from the national pricing pilot confirms that many providers were delivering services at a financial loss under the existing model, which has implications for long-term sustainability. The pilot's outcome was the development of a new national pricing model that links funding to actual cost drivers such as distance, geography, labour inputs and other operational factors (ACTA, 2025). This revised approach seeks to align funding with both the economic and social value of community transport, while also highlighting ongoing challenges related to workforce capacity, compliance requirements and the ability to fund vehicle replacement and upgrades as vehicles age.

Workforce sustainability and recognition of social value are important considerations in understanding the operating environment for community transport. These factors also help explain why community transport models differ across places and why some approaches prove more sustainable than others. Comparing Australian and international examples shows how different governance, funding and service design models shape the community transport sector.

2.6 Funding models for rural and low-density transport: international evidence

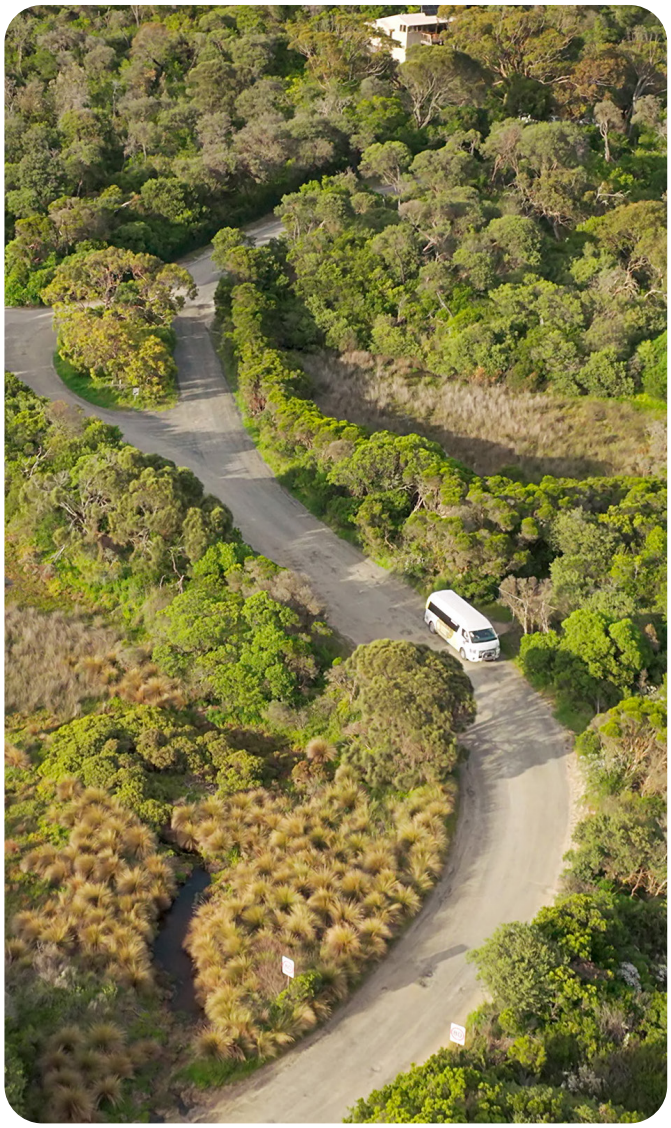
The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and its transport research body, the International Transport Forum (ITF), provide some of the most comprehensive international analyses of public transport funding and governance. The OECD produces comparative policy research for national governments across more than thirty member countries, focusing on economic and social development. The ITF operates as a global transport policy think tank within the OECD structure. It undertakes research for transport ministries and public agencies, with a particular focus on long-term mobility trends, funding models and system-wide challenges across urban, regional and rural settings (ITF, 2024). Several recent ITF studies have focused on the specific difficulties of providing sustainable mobility in rural and low-density regions, highlighting the structural conditions that make such services challenging to operate without public support (ITF, 2021, 2024).

A clear finding across this international research is that public transport in rural and low-density areas is rarely commercially viable. Passenger revenue typically covers only a portion of operating costs, and in sparsely populated regions this proportion is even smaller due to dispersed demand and long travel distances (ITF, 2024). As a result, governments at national, regional and local levels play a central role in financing both the establishment and operation of services. Funding commonly takes the form of grants, subsidised public service contracts or transfers from national budgets to regional authorities, which then procure local services. Fare revenue acts as a supplementary contribution rather than the foundation of the funding model.

In these settings, public transport is regarded as essential social infrastructure that supports social and economic participation rather than a commercial undertaking. The ITF notes that fixed-route services in rural areas face structural challenges because demand is low, trip patterns are irregular and travel distances are long (ITF, 2021). To maintain a minimum level of mobility, many countries classify certain routes as socially necessary and fund them accordingly. Some have adopted minimum service standards to guarantee access, such as ensuring that rural residents can reach municipal or regional centres at least twice per day. These standards are intended to protect small communities from service withdrawal and to avoid relying solely on patronage measures that do not reflect the realities of rural travel behaviour (ITF, 2021).

International guidance also emphasises the need to integrate community transport, on-demand services and social-service transport within broader public-transport frameworks. ITF research identifies fragmented funding across sectors such as health, disability and education as a barrier to rural mobility and recommends pooling these resources to improve efficiency, expand coverage and reduce duplication of services (ITF, 2021). Community transport and demand-responsive services are recognised as appropriate solutions for low-density areas, but the evidence consistently shows that they require stable and predictable funding to remain viable. Volunteer labour and low-cost operating structures can contribute to sustainability, yet they do not replace the need for formal governance arrangements and secure public funding (ITF, 2024).

Overall, the international literature positions rural and community transport as a publicly supported service that underpins social inclusion and regional development. Governments in comparable countries accept that such services require ongoing subsidy and design their funding systems accordingly. These models offer relevant insights for the Australian context, where community transport fills important mobility gaps yet is not always supported through the stable and coordinated funding mechanisms used in comparable international systems. Understanding how these approaches operate in practice requires examining concrete examples from Australia and overseas.



2.7 Australian and international case studies

Community transport and flexible mobility services have been developed in many rural and low-density regions internationally. Although the specific models differ, several consistent themes emerge across the literature. Services that rely on volunteers or community governance typically operate with modest ridership but generate significant social value. Demand responsive models improve access where fixed routes are not viable, yet face challenges around cost, operational reliability and long-term sustainability. Electric vehicle trials in regional areas highlight benefits such as lower emissions and quieter operation, but also reveal issues related to range, charging access and the need for dedicated support. These lessons provide a useful reference point for assessing the Gippsland pilot, as they show how different countries have adapted service design, funding and risk sharing to rural contexts.

Internationally, many of the mobility challenges facing community transport in Australia are mirrored in other countries, particularly in regions with ageing populations, low-density and rural areas with reduced public transport availability. In the United Kingdom, community transport operates within a mixed environment in which longstanding issues such as fragmented funding, variable local authority support and uneven integration with mainstream transport networks persist (Ravensbergen & Schwanen, 2023). At the same time, recent UK initiatives have encouraged more coordinated and socially oriented approaches. Programmes such as the Tackling Loneliness with Transport Fund highlight the role of community-led mobility in supporting wellbeing and social participation, while broader policy reforms have strengthened partnership working between local authorities, voluntary organisations and transport operators (National Centre for Social Research, 2024; Mulley & Nelson, 2012). Evidence from Scotland demonstrates that community transport generates substantial social and economic benefits, especially in rural and remote areas where commercial services are limited (Nelson et al., 2017). Across Europe, flexible and on-demand models continue to expand, with many countries exploring various technologies and service models to complement conventional public transport (International Transport Forum, 2021). For example, research from Italy shows that integrating demand responsive services with simplified fixed-route networks can help address the ridership coverage dilemma in small cities, improving accessibility in low-density environments (Giuffrida et al., 2021). These examples point to a broader shift towards hybrid approaches that combine community involvement, technology, and flexible service structures to improve mobility options in areas with limited resources.

Australian case studies

Wheatbelt Aged-Friendly Community Bus Trial (Western Australia)

The Wheatbelt Aged-Friendly Community Bus Trial addressed mobility challenges experienced by older residents in small, widely separated towns across regional Western Australia. The service linked isolated communities with regional centres, improving access to healthcare, shopping and social activities in a region with minimal public transport (Burnham et al., 2016). The evaluation found that patronage was modest but steady, with users relying on the service for essential trips and valuing the reliability and social connection it provided. The trial also showed that ongoing subsidy, clear operating roles for local government and consistent scheduling were necessary to maintain the service in low-density settings.

Insights for this project context: demonstrates the importance of community-oriented transport in rural regions with limited services, and shows how targeted support can reduce isolation and maintain access to essential services for older residents, even where passenger numbers are low.

Logan Demand Responsive Transport Trial (Queensland)

The Logan DRT Trial tested an on-demand transport model using app-based and phone bookings, operated by a commercial provider under contract to government. The service connected residents in low-density suburban areas with major destinations and transport hubs, using dynamic routing to respond to demand (Kaufman et al., 2021). The evaluation identified strengths such as flexibility and improved access, as well as challenges related to cost, patronage forecasting, and long-term financial sustainability.

Insights for this project context: provides lessons about demand-responsive service design, including booking technologies, trip patterns, operational reliability and the complexity of delivering flexible transport in areas with low or variable patronage.

International case studies

Northland On-Demand Community Bus (New Zealand)

In Northland, an on-demand community bus service was developed in partnership with Māori communities to address significant transport disadvantage in remote coastal areas (Liftango, 2024). The model, delivered with support from Liftango and governed locally through an iwi-led partnership, combines app-based booking with phone support. Conversations with Liftango practitioners highlighted improved access to healthcare and essential services, strong cultural alignment and high levels of community ownership and trust. These discussions also noted that while the digital booking platform offers useful functionality, its cost and technical requirements may limit its suitability for smaller communities with modest budgets or low trip volumes.

Insights for this project context: illustrates how community governance, co-design and technology-supported operations can work together to deliver transport in regions with no existing public services, supporting social and health outcomes.

Warwickshire Rural Electric Vehicle Trial (United Kingdom)

The Warwickshire trial examined the feasibility of electric vehicle operation among small rural organisations and businesses (Jones et al., 2020). Participants reported reduced vehicle emissions and lower running costs but also emphasised challenges related to limited charging infrastructure, range constraints and the need for

supportive local investment. The trial provides practical evidence on EV performance in rural contexts and shows that reliable operation depends on predictable charging access, careful trip planning and upfront support to assist small organisations with costs and infrastructure.

Insights for this project context: highlights the infrastructure, operational planning and risk considerations involved in using electric vehicles in rural areas, informing expectations around battery performance, charging availability and cost structures.

Community Sharing and Sustainable Mobility (Japan)

In several depopulating Japanese cities, including Kashiwa, local governments and neighbourhood organisations have implemented community buses, small, shared vehicles and electric microbuses to support older residents and reduce dependence on private cars (Ozaki et al., 2022). These initiatives respond to shrinking populations and declining local services by offering simple, predictable mobility at neighbourhood scale. Evaluations highlight high user satisfaction, strong participation among older residents, and operational models that combine public support with local volunteer or community involvement.

Insights for this project context: shows how community-led mobility initiatives can address ageing, environmental sustainability and wellbeing, and provides examples of small electric or low-emissions vehicles being used effectively in declining or low-demand areas.

Oslo Electric Bus Trials (Norway)

Norway's early electric bus trials, including those undertaken in Oslo, tested small and large electric buses across varied routes and challenging climatic conditions. Evaluations found that the transition to electric operation required substantial public support. According to Thorne et al. (2021), implementation depended on higher upfront investment, adjustments to procurement contracts to shield operators from unexpected financial risks, and targeted government funding for depot and on-route charging infrastructure. Winter conditions highlighted range limitations and the need for reliable charging, although reliability improved over time as infrastructure matured and operating practices were refined. The findings emphasise the importance of clear policy commitments, risk sharing between government and operators and coordinated investment in charging facilities when deploying electric buses.

Insights for this project context: reinforces the importance of supportive policy settings, reliable charging infrastructure and careful fleet planning when deploying electric vehicles, even at smaller scales.

It is important to note that no single example replicates the specific combination of conditions present in the Gippsland e-Bus Pilot. The Australian and international case studies reviewed here nonetheless illustrate several elements that are relevant to this project. Across rural and low-density settings, transport services rarely achieve commercial viability, and modest patronage is typical even in well-established programs. In these contexts, success is often understood in terms of improved accessibility, social participation and the ability to reach essential services rather than high trip volumes. Rural service delivery examples highlight the need for reliable transport options in sparsely populated areas, while community governance models show how local ownership can strengthen participation and trust.

Electric vehicle trials provide insight into the operational considerations associated with battery range, charging access and infrastructure planning. Although most EV trials have taken place in urban or larger regional centres, the findings highlight the importance of clear operating parameters and dedicated support when electric vehicles are used in demanding or variable conditions. This is relevant to the Gippsland pilot, which combined an electric vehicle with a community-led, demand responsive model in a regional environment. This configuration is uncommon in the literature and adds to existing evidence by showing how EV-specific factors interacted with volunteer availability, geographic distance and flexible scheduling.

The case studies do not offer a single direct comparator but illustrate how rural mobility has been approached in a range of contexts with differing constraints. They provide targeted insights into the elements that shaped the Gippsland pilot and help situate its findings within the broader international experience.

3 The Gippsland Community e-Bus Pilot overview

Recent feedback from residents across South Gippsland confirmed that access to transport remains a priority issue for many residents, particularly those without a private vehicle and those living in more isolated parts of the region (South Gippsland Shire Council, 2025). Community submissions highlighted transport as a barrier to accessing services, employment and daily activities, and Council identified public and community transport as an ongoing problem and advocacy priority. These challenges are longstanding in South Gippsland, and earlier community transport initiatives demonstrate how persistent the region's mobility gaps have been.

3.1 Context: community transport in South Gippsland

Community transport in South Gippsland has evolved over several decades in response to the region's dispersed geography, ageing population and limited public transport options. Earlier community transport models provide important insights into the conditions that shaped the need for the Gippsland Community e-Bus Pilot and help explain why new approaches were required for the towns of Sandy Point and Venus Bay.

For many years the South Gippsland Shire Council operated a volunteer-based community transport program using a small fleet of cars and minibuses based in Leongatha, Foster and Korumburra. The service was supported through the former Home and Community Care program and was primarily targeted to older adults, people with disabilities and carers (South Gippsland Shire Council, 2013). Although valued by users, the program did not function as a general transport option for the wider community. Long distances, eligibility restrictions and volunteer shortages limited the service's reach and made it difficult to extend transport to smaller coastal towns. Later Council documents do not detail the specific locations or routes in which the service continued to operate prior to its closure in 2021.

According to Council reporting, an external review undertaken between 2020 and 2021 identified that the community transport program had become significantly underused, with only a small number of regular passengers and a declining pool of volunteer drivers (South Gippsland Shire Council, 2021a). Council also noted that other providers had expanded transport available through aged care and disability programs during this period, which further reduced reliance on the council model. In August 2021 Council resolved to discontinue direct delivery of community transport and to transition remaining clients to alternative providers. Council documentation also stated an intention to establish a Community Transport Provider Network to support coordination across the region (South Gippsland Shire Council, 2021b).

The review highlighted that longstanding transport gaps persisted in coastal communities such as Sandy Point and Venus Bay. Existing community transport providers were based in larger inland towns and did not extend services to the coast due to distance, low and variable trip patterns and limited organisational capacity. With no scheduled public transport or taxi, many coastal residents relied on private vehicles or informal arrangements to reach essential services. These conditions contributed to concerns about social isolation, constrained access to health and community facilities and limited mobility options for people who did not drive.

Earlier models met the needs of eligible groups but did not offer a general transport option for the wider community, and they did not extend to small coastal towns, where travel patterns were inconsistent and shaped by seasonal fluctuations. Following the closure of the council-operated program, only limited formal community transport options remained available across South Gippsland (South Gippsland Shire Council, 2021a, 2021b). These longstanding gaps continued to shape local concerns about access, mobility and social participation.

3.2 Community and sustainability initiatives leading to the pilot

Persistent gaps in transport options, together with growing community interest in local sustainability initiatives, provided the foundation for developing the Gippsland Community e-Bus Pilot. Both Venus Bay and Sandy Point were progressing significant local sustainability work. Each town had been involved in renewable energy projects, including community battery installations and early exploration of microgrid concepts. These activities connected local leaders with the Gippsland Community Power Hub, one of the Victorian Government's Renewable Energy Hubs established through Sustainability Victoria. Engagement through the Hub strengthened conversations about how renewable energy initiatives might intersect with community needs beyond electricity supply.

It was within this context that the concept of an electric community transport service emerged. Members of the Venus Bay Community Centre, including representatives involved in renewable energy governance, recognised that transport disadvantage was a widespread issue across the towns participating in the Power Hub. As work progressed on battery installations and resilience planning, local leaders began exploring how small electric buses could provide a practical response to both transport gaps and community sustainability goals.

Early scoping work considered vehicle options, charging requirements and potential operating models. This early work also drew on existing relationships with DTP and iMOVE, developed through previous regional sustainability initiatives. Through these connections, the idea of a community-run electric bus service became a viable pilot proposal that brought together transport, technology, and community energy expertise.

The concept was then progressed with support from iMOVE and La Trobe University, leading to the development of a two-year applied research partnership. The pilot was formalised through the Victorian Government's Flexible Local Transport Solutions Program, auspiced by South Gippsland Shire Council, which funded two 12-seater electric minibuses, one for Sandy Point and one for Venus Bay.

The research partners were responsible for supporting local organisations to establish management arrangements, develop an operational and booking system, and gather evidence to inform future policy and planning. The pilot was designed to test whether a community-operated electric vehicle could improve local mobility while aligning with broader sustainability and renewable energy objectives.

3.3 Community profiles

Understanding the demographic, geographic and service context of Sandy Point and Venus Bay is essential for evaluating the pilot's relevance and design. South Gippsland is a steadily growing rural region, with a population of 30,577 recorded in the 2021 Census and an average annual growth rate of around 1 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2021). Over the past three decades, the region has experienced a consistent demographic shift toward an older population. In 1991, approximately 32 per cent of residents were under 18 and 17 per cent were aged 60 or older. By 2021, only 20 per cent were under 18 while 35 per cent were aged over 60, a trend projected to remain stable to 2036 (South Gippsland Shire Council, 2022).

During the COVID period, population numbers along the South Gippsland coast increased, with more part-time and permanent residents spending time in the region. Older adults, particularly those aged 60 to 84, moved from metropolitan areas to holiday homes for lifestyle and health reasons, increasing both part-time and permanent residency in small coastal towns. These demographic changes are pronounced in Sandy Point and Venus Bay, where the median age is 58 compared with the Victorian and Australian median of 38. Census data shows that 37 per cent of Sandy Point residents and 36 per cent of Venus Bay residents are aged between 60 and 74, more than twice the national average (ABS, 2021).

Disability rates in the region are comparable with Victorian averages, with around 6 per cent of residents reporting a need for assistance with core activities (South Gippsland Shire Council, 2022). This proportion increases significantly in older age groups. While detailed disability data at the township level is limited, local consultations indicate the presence of residents with mobility limitations and restricted access to vehicles, contributing to transport disadvantage.

Public transport coverage along the coast is limited. Neither Sandy Point nor Venus Bay is serviced by regular timetabled public transport, and there are no local taxi services. Access to taxis from nearby towns is minimal due to long travel distances and low availability, and there are no rideshare options. 60 per cent of South Gippsland households own two or more cars, above the Australian average of 55.1 per cent (ABS, 2021) as residents rely on private vehicles for access to medical services, supermarkets, social activities and V/Line connections in larger nearby towns. This reliance creates challenges for residents who cannot or prefer not to drive long distances. These demographic and accessibility characteristics created the underlying conditions for exploring a new model of locally supported transport. They also highlight why small-scale, flexible services are necessary for coastal towns in South Gippsland.

Sandy Point

Sandy Point is a small coastal township near Waratah Bay with approximately 300 permanent residents. The population increases during peak holiday periods as visitors occupy holiday homes and camping facilities. The town has limited commercial services, with residents travelling to nearby towns such as Foster, Fish Creek, Wonthaggi and Leongatha for shopping, medical appointments, community activities and public transport connections. Residents depend almost entirely on private vehicles or informal arrangements for travel.

The community has a strong interest in renewable energy and local resilience. Sandy Point has invested in solar generation and battery storage, including a community battery at the Community Centre and a public charging facility near the Men's Shed reflecting community interest in supporting electric mobility. The township also has a strong volunteer culture, with established community groups and active participation in local initiatives.

Venus Bay

Venus Bay is a larger coastal town with around 2,400 permanent and part time residents. The population increases to more than 8,000 during peak visitor seasons, creating varied and sometimes intense transport demand. The town is located on a narrow peninsula with a single access road, contributing to a sense of isolation and highlighting the importance of reliable local transport during peak periods and emergencies. Local facilities include a precinct with a general store, a pharmacy and a small café, with access to most essential services requiring travel to nearby towns.

As in Sandy Point, there is no public transport in Venus Bay or access to taxi or rideshare services. Residents who do not drive or who have mobility limitations face significant barriers in accessing medical services, shopping and community activities. The Venus Bay Community Centre is a focal point for the community and has invested in solar and battery systems that support local resilience. The Centre has also operated a seasonal diesel "beach shuttle" (hiring a vehicle for a two-week period), demonstrating both experience with transport coordination and clear evidence of local demand.

The combination of limited transport access, engaged communities, and supportive energy infrastructure made both Sandy Point and Venus Bay suitable locations for testing a flexible transport model designed to meet local needs using an electric vehicle.

3.4 Pilot strategy and scope

The project strategy combined community-led service delivery with a structured research framework. The pilot's scope was shaped by three considerations:

1. **local transport needs in Venus Bay and Sandy Point,**
2. **community priorities relating to renewable energy and climate resilience, and**
3. **the project's research objectives as agreed by partners.**

The strategy aimed to determine whether a flexible, community-run service could operate viably in an area where conventional public transport is not feasible. The project also sought to understand the social, economic and environmental outcomes associated with such a model. These outcomes were defined at the outset of the project and provided a framework for both service design and evaluation.

To assess viability, the pilot examined the relationship between demand and cost, recognising that a community-run service must attract sufficient use while remaining affordable to operate. This required understanding two core questions:

a. **what drives demand for a community-run service, and**
b. **which operational and organisational factors influence cost and long-term sustainability.**

The analysis was structured around four innovation areas identified in earlier research (IPPG, 2022): fleet, service design, operations, and customer-facing systems. Together, these areas provided the analytical structure for the pilot and guided the development of the research questions. Table 3 summarises the innovation areas, the associated research objectives and examples of the questions investigated.

Table 3: Community transport innovation areas, research objectives and example questions

Innovation area	Research objective	Example research questions
Fleet	Determine whether a 12-seat accessible electric minibus meets local needs efficiently.	Does a 12-seater vehicle match the pattern of demand? Would a smaller vehicle or multiple vehicles perform better?
Service design	Identify the service offering (coverage, price, flexibility) that optimises both demand and cost.	How can the service be optimised within available resources? What is the best balance between personalised and standardised service? Can the service link with V/Line or other modes? Can it support visitor transport during peak seasons? What pricing model is appropriate?
Operations	Determine the operational model that can meet demand while keeping costs sustainable.	What lessons can be drawn from other community transport organisations? Can the service scale up/down for seasonal demand? Can a volunteer workforce meet regulatory and service requirements? What is the real cost (financial and social) of volunteer delivery? Can the service reliably connect to external public transport?
Customer-facing systems	Identify user-facing innovations that improve uptake and accessibility.	What booking mechanism works best? Are real-time booking and ETA functions feasible? Would visible vehicle tracking improve planning and uptake? What payment options best support sustainability?

Following from this, three domains of potential benefit were identified to guide the pilot's design and assessment. Table 4 sets out these domains and their corresponding objectives.

Table 4: Pilot success areas and objectives

Success area	Objective
Social inclusion	Reduce transport-related disadvantage by improving access to employment, medical services, shopping and social activities for residents with limited transport options.
Economic benefits	1. Enable participation in work and education for groups currently disadvantaged by limited transport. 2. Support local economic activity, including visitor access and community participation.
Environmental benefits	Increase environmental sustainability through reduced emissions and integration with local renewable energy systems.

These intended outcomes form the basis for the evaluation framework outlined in Chapter 6. The success areas and innovation themes informed how the pilot was planned and delivered. The resulting design and implementation approach is outlined below.

3.5 Pilot design and implementation approach

The pilot design integrated community priorities, transport needs and sustainability objectives into a coordinated approach to service planning and delivery. The success areas provided the foundation for how the pilot was planned and delivered. The strategy involved the following components:

- Community organisational structure: establishing local management arrangements, defining roles, responsibilities and regulatory requirements, and supporting the operational planning that resulted in the project's business plan.
- Service design: identifying service areas and trip purposes, determining operating hours, exploring route options and selecting booking and customer-facing systems suitable for local needs.
- Operations and workforce: recruiting and training volunteer drivers, coordinating daily service delivery, using the booking system, managing driver rosters, maintaining the vehicle and supporting volunteer-led operations.
- Community engagement and awareness: raising local awareness of the service, developing communication plans, supporting volunteer recruitment, and aligning the service with broader sustainability and resilience initiatives in each town.
- Monitoring and evaluation: establishing baseline metrics, collecting operational and user data, and conducting mid-project and final evaluations to understand performance and impact.

This staged approach supported progressive service development and generated lessons relevant to other regional towns considering similar transport models. It also allowed the project to examine whether the model could be viable, and how local management, community involvement and energy systems shaped its performance.

4 Service implementation

Implementation of the pilot began after the baseline community survey in early 2024, which shaped the service model adopted in each town. Venus Bay and Sandy Point then developed their own operational arrangements to deliver the service. While both communities worked with the same vehicles and shared the project objectives, the practical arrangements differed and evolved over time as each town built the systems, processes and workforce needed to operate a safe and reliable community transport service.

4.1 Vehicle

The two pilot communities operated 12-seat electric minibuses purchased through the Victorian Government's Flexible Local Transport Solutions Program. At the time of procurement in 2023, this was the only electric minibus of its size available on the Australian market. Each vehicle was modified to accommodate a wheelchair passenger and eight to nine seated passengers, allowing the service to remain below the regulatory thresholds requiring heavy-vehicle licences or commercial bus accreditation. The wheelchair system was fitted with an electric lift and restraint equipment, and both buses were branded with community-designed decals to increase visibility.

The vehicles were fully electric and charged exclusively through AC outlets, which posed constraints in regional Victoria where most public infrastructure supports DC charging. Range varied substantially depending on temperature, passenger load, the use of air-conditioning or heating and how the vehicle was driven. These EV-specific characteristics shaped how the service was implemented, particularly for longer trips or those requiring multiple stops.

Scheduled servicing and warranty repairs for both vehicles was undertaken by the Melbourne based dealership which provided the vehicles. A combination of volunteers and local mechanics carried out basic checks and minor maintenance repairs such as tyre rotation/ replacement. Insurance costs were higher than expected, partly because EV minibuses remain uncommon in rural contexts with some providers reluctant to insure them.

Both vehicles experienced several technical issues over the trial period. These issues included: failure of tailgate struts, and door release mechanisms, lights not working if indicator used, rusting, controller and air conditioning failing to work, seals around doors becoming loose, latches and clips breaking, poor passenger step design, and repeated suspension problems on unsealed and uneven roads.

The Sandy Point vehicle, ***Sandy***, was generally more reliable than ***Sunny***, the Venus Bay vehicle, which encountered more frequent and severe mechanical / electrical faults and resulted in several periods when the vehicle was unavailable. Volunteers frequently noted concerns about noise produced by the wheelchair mechanism during travel and the limited suspension on rough roads, both of which affected passenger comfort.

Sandy Point's vehicle was stored in the Men's Shed, providing secure shelter and access to local expertise, while Venus Bay's vehicle was stored in the Community Centre carpark. In August 2025 ***Sunny*** sustained significant damage during an attempted theft, causing a month-long interruption to service.

4.2 Service design

Service design was shaped by consultation during the baseline survey conducted in January 2024, early community meetings, and ongoing input from volunteers. Each community developed its own approach, reflecting differences in geography, trip purposes and volunteer availability. Both services began with an initial trial of scheduled routes but later adapted to offer more flexible trip-by-trip transport.

Sandy Point

Sandy Point initially trialled a scheduled circulation route connecting the township with nearby destinations and V/Line stops. The service attracted little uptake, and after several weeks the community shifted to a predominantly on-demand model. This model provided greater responsiveness to local preferences, as residents were accustomed to travelling independently and not so willing to adhere to a fixed timetable.

Over time, bookings became focused on connections to V/Line services, social outings, and trips to nearby venues such as Waratah Hills Winery, Fish Creek Hotel, and local community events. Operating hours were shaped by volunteer availability, with capacity varying seasonally as many residents left the area during the winter months. Range considerations limited acceptance of some bookings, particularly those requiring steep gradients or extended use of climate control.

Venus Bay

Venus Bay designed its service around a combination of scheduled and on-demand transport. The community initially offered a weekly shopping trip to Leongatha, later adjusting the schedule to include weekly trips to Wonthaggi and fortnightly trips to Leongatha in response to passenger preferences. The service also accepted bookings for individual trips, group outings and V/Line connections.

The Community Centre's existing role meant that some transport was integrated with its broader program of activities, including outings arranged through the Centre's social programs. Like Sandy Point, volunteer availability influenced operating hours, and winter periods resulted in a smaller pool of available drivers. EV range limitations also required careful management, particularly for longer trips and return journeys for group outings.

4.3 Booking system

At the start of the pilot, both communities participated in work to develop a simple digital booking system created by La Trobe University using Google Apps Script, Google Sheets and Google Calendar. The system was based on best practices from Skedgo, Liftango, Via, Orcoda, and Keolis Downer. It was designed to test whether bookings could be captured in real time and to collect data on trip purpose, passenger characteristics and first-time use. The tool proved difficult for many residents to use and did not align well with the preferred communication patterns of the two communities, both of which valued direct human contact. For those responsible for taking the bookings, there was a preference to use smartphones to operate the backend, but the free suite of Google products proved hard to use on a smartphone.

Sandy Point

Sandy Point discontinued the initial platform early in the trial after residents showed a strong preference for telephone, email, or paper-based bookings. One volunteer with website experience subsequently integrated a customised booking form into the community's website which used the Wix® website builder platform. This system was widely adopted and became the primary method for submitting booking requests, supplemented by phone and email contact for residents who preferred a personal interaction.

Venus Bay

Venus Bay used the La Trobe platform for much of 2024, with staff manually managing offline bookings alongside it. In late 2024, funding from the South Gippsland Shire Council enabled the Community Centre to develop a new website incorporating a Humanitix based booking form, which users found easier to navigate.

In both communities, behind the scenes, volunteers still coordinated driver rosters, confirmed bookings via phone, text message or email, and managed cancellations manually. Last-minute requests increased over time, requiring volunteers to coordinate drivers at short notice.

Although the project explored the feasibility of procuring a fully supported booking platform through a 'Request for Proposal', it did not proceed due to limited funding and volunteer capacity to undertake this large piece of work.

4.4 Community management arrangements

1. **Organisational structure**

   Sandy Point established the Sandy Point Bus Management Committee (SPBMC) in 2023 to oversee the service. The committee was responsible for coordination, booking oversight, communications, financial management and light operational tasks. Membership fluctuated during the trial, and the committee ultimately operated with a small core group carrying most responsibilities.

   In Venus Bay, the service was operated through the Venus Bay Community Centre (VBCC), an established organisation with an existing board and paid staff. The Centre Manager and administrative staff coordinated transport activities alongside other community programs, supported by volunteers who assisted with driving and bookings.

   La Trobe University provided Local Engagement Officers in each community for one day per week to support administrative tasks, data collection, documentation and community engagement throughout the trial.

2. **Volunteer workforce**

   Both communities recruited more than 20 volunteer drivers in early 2024. Many volunteers were older residents and part-time locals whose availability varied seasonally. A small core group assumed most driving duties, some withdrew due to concerns about EV operation, range anxiety, discomfort with the vehicle size or reduced confidence when not driving regularly.

   Volunteers also assisted with bookings, communications, maintenance coordination and promotion of the service. Informal training sessions and a driver manual supported familiarisation with the vehicle and procedures. Over time, the communities recognised the need for additional administrative volunteers to reduce workload pressure. At the end of the project Venus Bay had 31 active volunteers and Sandy Point had 16. A total of 20 others registered to become volunteer drivers but have yet to complete any drives for either community.

3. **Compliance and safety**

   Both communities selected a 12-seat configuration to remain below the regulatory thresholds for commercial bus accreditation. Initial information from Safe Transport Victoria (STV) suggested that accreditation was not required for not-for-profit services operating without fares and below seat-capacity thresholds. Routine safety inspections, tyre and brake replacements, and insurance were managed locally. Annual servicing was generally done in Melbourne by the dealership. Insurance costs were notably higher than for diesel minibuses, reflecting the relative novelty of electric vehicles in regional settings.

4.5 Finances and cost management

The communities were aware of the ongoing costs required to operate the e-Buses. These included registration, insurance, roadside assistance, scheduled servicing, safety checks, administration tools, branding and communications materials, website and phone expenses. What neither community anticipated was the additional electricity required. Although the e-Buses were charged from local solar installations, electricity consumption quickly exceeded on-site generation, meaning that additional power needed to be purchased from the grid.

To raise some revenue to cover some of the costs, Sandy Point chose to introduce a donations-based model early in the trial. The initial suggested contribution was set at $5 per passenger, but this was revised over time as the committee gained a clearer understanding of operational costs. Donations remained voluntary and no passenger was refused travel on financial grounds. To support volunteers taking bookings, a suggested donation map was published on the website, outlining typical amounts for common destinations. One volunteer recently took this further and developed a donation calculator, using distance and time, to calculate a suggested donation which now replaces the donation map. The committee noted that setting the suggested amounts too high risked passengers choosing to carpool instead, so maintaining an appropriate balance required continual monitoring.

Venus Bay initially offered the service free of charge. Staff and volunteers were reluctant to request payment during the early months because the reliability of the vehicle was still uncertain. Over time, however, this made it difficult to introduce even a gold-coin contribution, as many residents assumed the service was fully funded by government and free to use. Volunteers expressed concern that requesting donations at a later stage may undermine goodwill or create confusion among long-term users.

Both communities also relied on small fundraising efforts to supplement their operating budgets. These included events such as community stalls, workshops, making the e-Bus available to ferry passengers to private events for an agreed donation, and informal donation drives. While often successful, they required significant volunteer effort and were not viewed as a sustainable long-term funding model.

4.6 Community engagement and communications

The communities undertook a range of engagement and communication activities to introduce the service and build awareness. Information sessions, social media posts, community-newsletter articles, posters, fridge magnets and website updates were used to explain how the service operated, who could use it and how to book. The vehicles themselves also served as visible promotions within the towns due to their distinctive branding.

Each community also engaged with local events and organisations. Sandy Point displayed the bus at community gatherings and later introduced a monthly ‘Chatty Café’ at the Community Centre to provide a space for social connection and an opportunity to promote the service. Venus Bay promoted the service through its weekly community lunch and through the broader programs of the Community Centre as well as displays at regional community events.

Both communities provided their vehicles for the provision of transport at conferences and regional events such as the Gippsland New Energy Conference, raising visibility beyond the immediate township. The Venus Bay Community Centre received the Neighbourhood Houses Gippsland Climate Action Award in 2024 for its work on the project.

As the services began to mature, personal interactions became the most effective way to increase awareness. Volunteer drivers played a key role in encouraging new users, explaining how to book, and promoting social outings. They encouraged community members to utilise the vehicle to ferry passengers to private events for a donation. This had the added benefit of reducing the likelihood of drink driving as there are no taxi or rideshare services for people to utilise, a benefit which should not be underestimated. Some residents required direct support to build confidence in using the service, particularly those with limited English or digital literacy. Over time, word-of-mouth referrals, group outings and regular use by semi-permanent residents helped embed the service within community life.

5 Service operations in practice

Patterns of demand, booking practices and volunteer capacity shaped how each community ran the service and how residents experienced it. Although Venus Bay and Sandy Point used the same type of vehicle, the practical delivery differed, influenced by geography, travel needs, volunteer availability, local expectations and the economic differences of each community. The material that follows demonstrates how the service was used and managed, and the factors that influenced its performance.

5.1 Service demand and usage patterns

Ridership patterns

Ridership increased steadily across both communities over the course of the pilot. Monthly operational activity and ridership data (Appendix C) detail the numbers for both communities.

Table 5: Total trips and passengers each year - Appendix C

Sandy Point	2024	2025
Number of Trips	138	185
Number of Passengers	512	714

Venus Bay	2024	2025
Number of Trips	104	118
Number of Passengers	618	1048

The increase in usage and passenger numbers match anecdotal observations that once residents became familiar and confident with the service and its reliability, trust strengthened and word spread to others who booked, along with repeat user bookings.

While monthly trip numbers remained modest, the pattern observed is consistent with volunteer run community transport in small rural towns. In low-density settings, demand typically reflects the size of the resident population, and the specific nature of local travel needs, rather than high frequency or repeated daily use. The gradual increase in both trips and passengers over the two years suggests growing familiarity and confidence in the service as it became embedded in community routines.

Both towns recorded strong engagement with the e-Bus service. Figures 1a and 1b show the proportion of respondents in each town who reported using the service, with most indicating they had travelled on the e-Bus at least once. This level of engagement is significant for a community transport service introduced in small, geographically dispersed coastal towns. Usage patterns also suggest that the service enabled trips that residents may otherwise have avoided. A significant proportion of respondents indicated that they would not have travelled at all without the e-Bus, particularly where driving long distances, night-time travel or confidence on rural roads were barriers.

Figure 1 a: Percentage of e-Bus use in Sandy Point - final community survey 2025

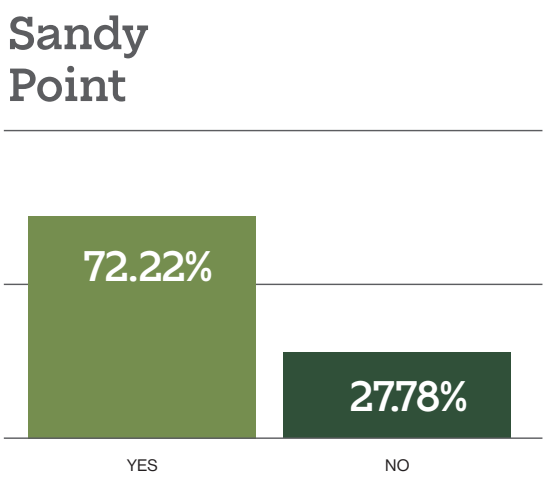
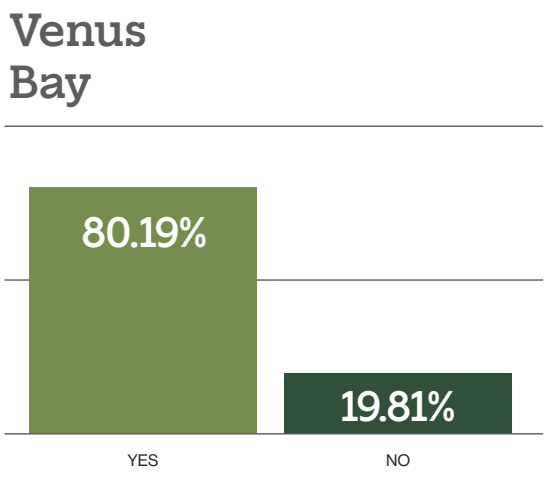


Figure 1 b: Percentage of e-Bus use in Venus Bay - final community survey 2025



Patterns of use varied across the two towns and reflected local geography. Trip destinations clustered around nearby towns, with Sandy Point passengers most frequently travelling to Fish Creek, Foster and Leongatha. Venus Bay passengers travelled most often to Leongatha, Wonthaggi and Tarwin Lower, with a relatively large number also reporting "other" destinations, often combining several stops in a single outing.

Table 6: Survey respondent destinations travelled to using the e-Bus - final community survey 2025

Sandy Point

Destination	Count	Percent
Fish Creek	48	28.92%
Foster	33	19.88%
Leongatha	22	13.25%
Wonthaggi	13	7.83%
Meeniyan	9	5.42%
Inverloch	7	4.22%
Waratah Bay	5	3.01%
Yanakie	3	1.81%
Walkerville	1	0.60%
Other	25	15.06%
Total	166	100%

Venus Bay

Destination	Count	Percent
Leongatha	24	21.43%
Wonthaggi	21	18.75%
Tarwin Lower	21	18.75
Foster	7	6.25%
Meeniyan	6	5.36%
Inverloch	4	3.57%
Other	29	25.89%
Total	112	100%

These patterns align with interview feedback. Sandy Point travel tended to focus on nearby towns for social outings, and V/Line connections. Venus Bay residents used the service for a wider and more dispersed set of destinations, often linked to essential services such as groceries, banking, medical appointments and combined multi-purpose trips.

Several passengers and drivers noted that new users were often first introduced through group activities or word-of-mouth. For some residents, particularly older adults or those who had recently stopped driving, the e-Bus provided a practical and low-stress way to continue travelling locally. As one driver noted, "people come on once, realise how easy it is, and then they book again".

Trip purposes

The services in each community supported a diverse range of trip purposes. By the end of the project the types of travel people were using the service for can be summarised as follows:

Table 7: Main purpose of travel - Appendix C

	Sandy Point	Venus Bay
Social / Group activities	47%	38%
V/Line connection	36%	9%
Shopping/Scheduled	8%	49%
Maintenance/Induction	7%	4%
Wheelchair/Bikes/Community	2%	n/a

In Sandy Point, social and group outings were a major contributor to early uptake, and played an important role in introducing new users, maintaining visibility whilst supporting local events and businesses. V/Line connections were also important, providing essential first and last mile access for residents with limited travel options.

Shopping and essential-needs trips were also common, particularly in Venus Bay where weekly and monthly connections to Wonthaggi and Leongatha were well used.

Short-notice or one-off trips also occurred regularly, as both communities did their best to respond to immediate needs where capacity allowed.

Seasonal variation

Demand varied across the year in response to seasonal population shifts and local event calendars. Both towns experience a sharp increase in visitors and part-time residents during summer and holiday periods, which contributed to higher demand for outings, recreational trips and group bookings. In Sandy Point, these periods also generated a greater number of private-group or social bookings, often linked to community activities or visiting family groups.

Venus Bay experienced similar peaks, with residents noting that congestion, parking pressure and visitor activity made the e-Bus a more attractive option during busy periods. During quieter months, demand shifted towards essential activities such as shopping and V/Line connections. Drivers in both towns reported that seasonal patterns were predictable and closely tied to weather, school holidays and the timing of local events, influencing when volunteers were available and how trips were scheduled.

User demand profile

Survey responses indicate that many users were older adults, long-term residents and individuals with varying levels of access to private vehicles. Many households reported owning one or two vehicles, but this did not always translate into confidence driving longer distances or travelling at night when wildlife was a concern. For part-time residents and visitors, travelling with a local driver familiar with rural roads was seen as an added advantage.

In Sandy Point, the user base included a mix of permanent residents and seasonal homeowners who took part in group outings and social events. In Venus Bay, where essential-service travel formed a greater proportion of demand, users were more likely to be full-time residents who relied on external towns for daily needs.

Interview material aligns with these patterns. Drivers noted that many regular users were residents who had "cut back on driving" or preferred not to drive beyond local roads. Several passengers described the bus as a practical way to travel independently without relying on family or neighbours. This profile reflects a group of residents for whom the e-Bus offered a convenient, accessible and low-stress alternative to private car use.

Figure 2 a: Alternative travel options among Sandy Point respondents if the e-Bus was unavailable - final community survey 2025

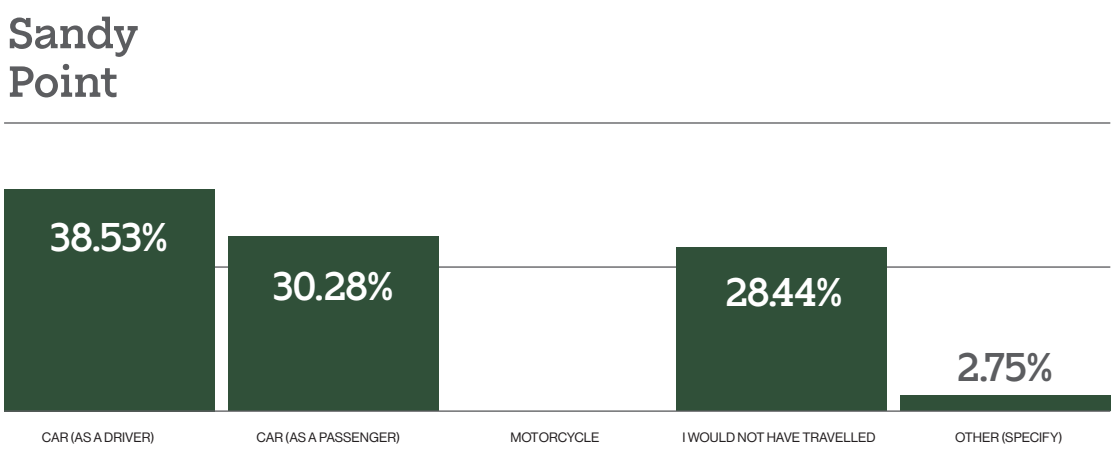
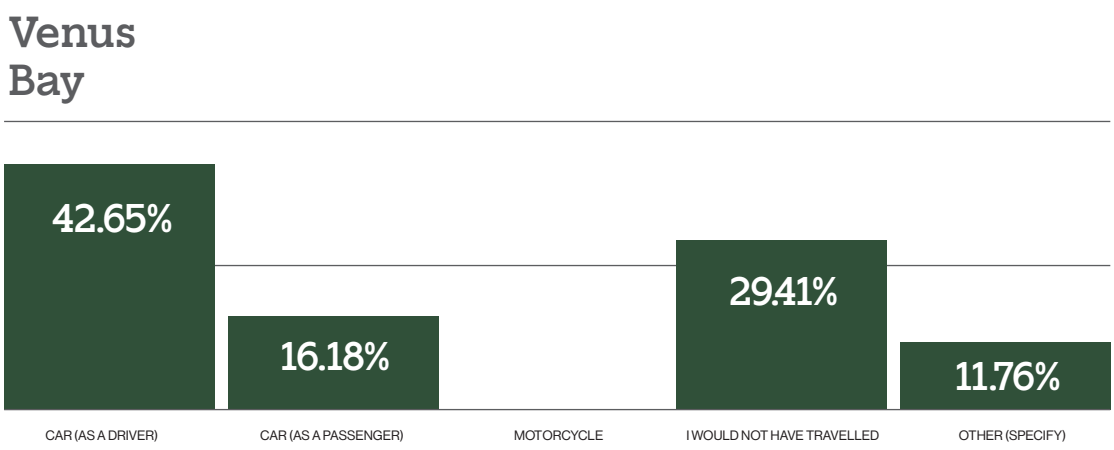


Figure 2 b: Alternative travel options among Venus Bay respondents if the e-Bus was unavailable - final community survey 2025



Survey findings reinforce this picture. As shown in Figures 2a and 2b, many respondents reported that if the e-Bus had not been available they would not have travelled at all, even though most households own one or more vehicles. This highlights a gap betwemen car ownership and practical mobility, particularly for residents who were uncomfortable driving longer distances or at night, and further underscores the value of a local, low-stress transport option.

5.2 User experience and service accessibility

User satisfaction

Survey results show very high levels of satisfaction in both towns, supported by strong interview feedback. In Sandy Point, almost three quarters of respondents rated their overall satisfaction as 10 out of 10, with a further 18 per cent giving a score of 9. The mean score was 9.48, indicating consistently positive experiences with the service. Venus Bay results were similarly strong, although with more variation. Almost half of respondents rated the service as 10

out of 10 and a further 23 per cent provided a score of 9, producing a mean of 8.90. Only two respondents gave a rating below 5.

These results align closely with the qualitative feedback collected through interviews. Passengers described the service as reliable, friendly and easy to use. Many valued the reassurance of travelling with someone they knew, particularly for longer trips or journeys they preferred not to drive themselves. Several noted that their first experience using the service was more straightforward and relaxed than expected, which encouraged them to book again.

Volunteers' professionalism and local knowledge contributed strongly to satisfaction. Part-time residents and particularly visitors, commented that travelling with a local driver made unfamiliar roads feel easier and safer. Being collected close to home was also mentioned as a key advantage, especially during busy periods when parking or traffic created stress.

Some passengers raised issues about internal comfort, such as firm suspension on rural roads or inconsistent heating and cooling on longer trips. These comments appeared more frequently in Venus Bay and are consistent with the vehicle issues they experienced and impacted the level of satisfaction. Even so, most respondents framed these issues as minor considerations rather than barriers to use.

The satisfaction results indicate that users valued the dependability of the service, the support of volunteers and the convenience of door-to-door travel. Survey and interview evidence show a strong and positive user experience, with occasional comfort-related concerns reflecting vehicle quality rather than dissatisfaction with the service model.

The open-text responses in the final survey reinforce these satisfaction patterns, but they also reveal a broader theme: many residents viewed the e-Bus as an important part of community life, not simply as a transport option they happened to use. Several respondents reflected on the consequences of losing the service, given the limited alternatives available in both towns. As some residents explained:

> *"This is our LIFELINE. It needs to be expanded and continuously funded. The increased access to medical services and public transport connections are critical to our community, and the improved access to community events is vital for keeping up connections to community in our aging and isolated population. Sunny forever!!" (Venus Bay resident)*

A similar sentiment was expressed by another respondent, who noted the difference the service had made to everyday mobility and the potential impact if it were withdrawn:

> *"[Sandy] absolutely has improved things, especially providing a connection to the V/Line service, and enabling group outings without needing multiple vehicles, also providing transport for residents when for various reasons they were not able to drive. It would be very disappointing, and create difficulties for many residents, if the service was discontinued." (Sandy Point resident)*

These reflections show that satisfaction extended beyond individual trip experiences. For many users, the e-Bus contributed to a broader sense of security, independence and connection, reinforcing its role as a service the community wished to retain.

When residents were asked to describe the service in their own words, the most common terms highlighted convenience, friendliness and reliability in Sandy Point, while Venus Bay responses placed stronger emphasis on the service being essential, community-minded and useful. The word clouds below illustrate these themes visually and show how both communities viewed the e-Bus as a dependable and valued part of local life, even though their reasons for using it differed slightly.

Figure 3 a: Words used by Sandy Point respondents to describe the e-Bus - final community survey 2025

Figure 3 b: Words used by Venus Bay respondents to describe the e-Bus - final community survey 2025

Service reliability and convenience

Convenience and reliability were consistently highlighted across surveys and interviews. Passengers valued being collected close to home, which reduced the need to manage parking, traffic or long walking distances. This was especially relevant in Venus Bay during peak visitor periods, when congestion and limited parking made local driving more difficult.

Users experienced the service as punctual and dependable. Volunteer drivers were attentive to pick-up times and maintained careful coordination with V/Line services, even where return times were uncertain. Volunteers occasionally needed to wait for updates or divide responsibility between drivers, but passengers described these arrangements as smooth and well organised.

Flexibility also contributed to the overall sense of convenience. Short travel distances within towns allowed drivers to adjust pick-up times when required, and passengers attending group outings typically arrived early, supporting timely departures. Some passengers mentioned noise, vibration and heating or cooling inconsistencies inside the vehicle, but these observations related to comfort rather than to reliability itself.

Booking systems

Survey responses show that users generally found the booking process workable once they understood how it operated, though initial awareness varied across both towns. Some residents did not realise that individual trips could be booked and assumed the service was mainly for group outings or advertised activities.

Despite the availability of online booking options, most passengers preferred to telephone a volunteer to arrange their travel. Many valued the personal contact, the reassurance of speaking with someone they knew, and the ability to ask questions directly, particularly in Venus Bay. This preference was especially strong among older residents and people less familiar with digital platforms. The same pattern was present in Sandy Point, although some residents did transition to using the online booking platform, which had been developed and refined through significant effort by a local volunteer.

Figures 4a and 4b indicate that most respondents in Sandy Point and Venus Bay rated booking as easy or very easy, even though many continued to prefer calling a volunteer rather than booking online.

Figure 4 a: Ease of booking reported by Sandy Point respondents - final community survey 2025

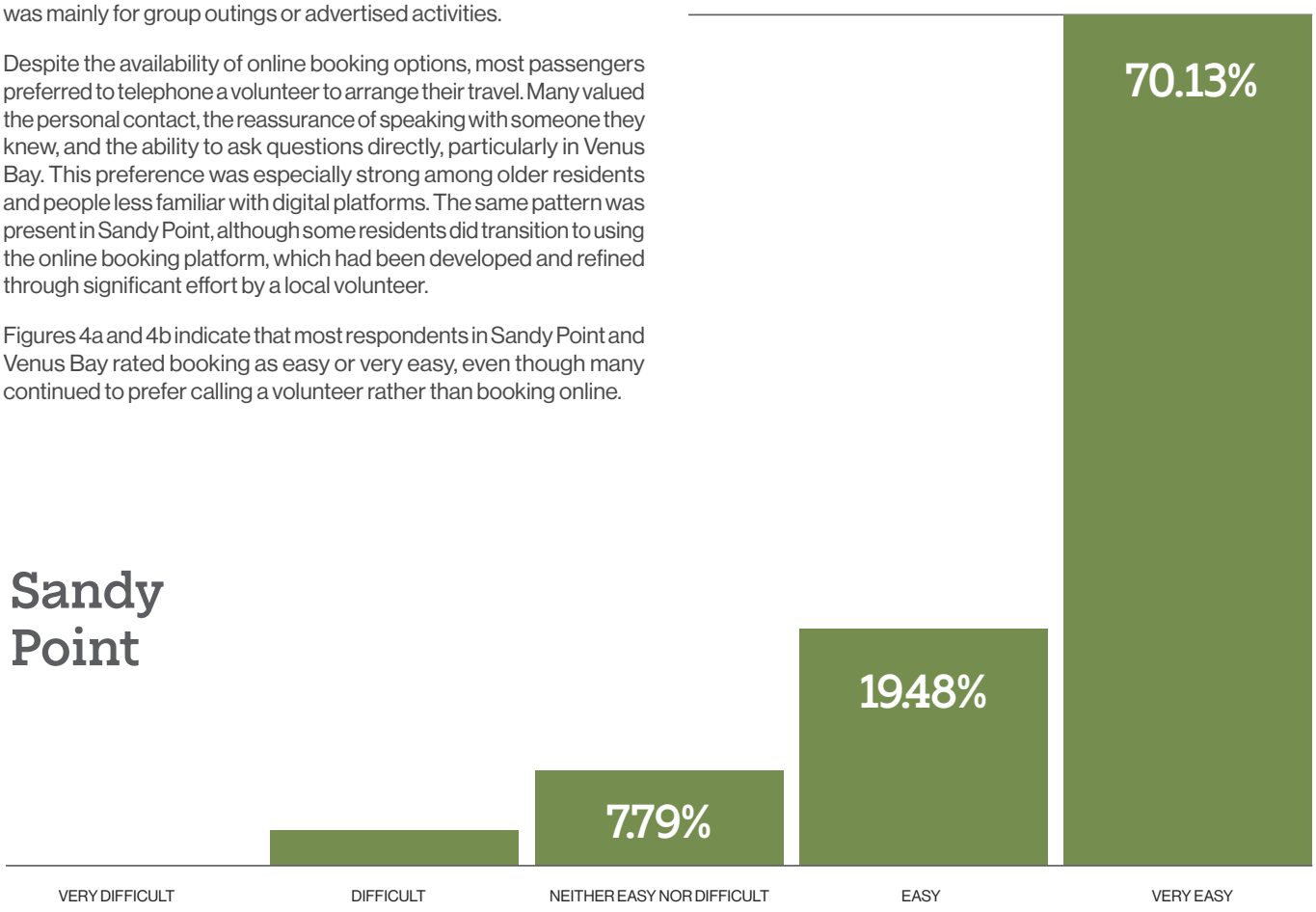
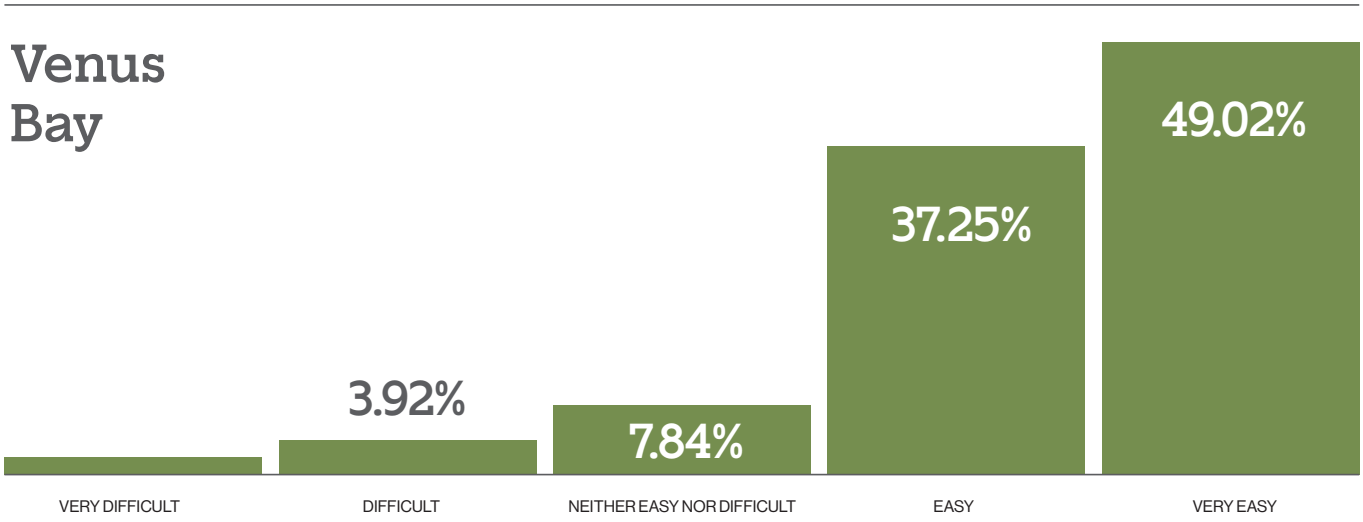


Figure 4 b: Ease of booking reported by Venus Bay respondents - final community survey 2025



Volunteers described booking coordination as one of the more time-intensive parts of service delivery. Requests arrived at varying times, requiring the booking officer to follow up with passengers, clarify details and check driver availability. Passengers, however, described volunteers as approachable and helpful, and many appreciated the direct, personal nature of the system.

Barriers to use and unmet needs

A range of practical, social and informational factors influenced whether residents chose to use the service. These barriers were generally modest and could be reduced through clearer communication, improved awareness and continued adaptation of the service model.

- **Understanding how the service could be used**

  Some residents were unsure about the types of trips the e-Bus could accommodate. Several did not realise that individual trips were available and assumed the bus was mainly for advertised outings. This was mentioned more often in Sandy Point, where a small number of respondents felt uncomfortable about booking the vehicle for a single-person trip. Visitors and part-time residents were generally more willing to make individual bookings, particularly for V/Line connections.

- **Car dependency and established travel habits**

  As stated earlier, ABS data found 60% of South Gippsland households have two or more cars which is higher than for Victoria (53%) and Australia (55.1%) as a whole (2021). A preference for owning and familiarity with using private vehicles reduced the likelihood that some residents viewed the e-Bus as necessary.

- **Booking processes and confidence using digital tools**

  The booking process worked well for most users but remained a barrier for some. Residents who were unfamiliar with digital tools preferred to phone a volunteer and were sometimes unsure whom to contact or how much notice was required. This created uneven awareness and added pressure for volunteers managing phone bookings.

- **Understanding service limitations**

  Survey responses indicated that a small number of non-users expected the e-Bus to operate like a regular public transport service with fixed timetables and broad coverage. In low-density coastal towns, demand-responsive community transport cannot operate at this scale. Educating residents about availability of the service was a constant requirement.

- **Part-time residents and seasonal users**

  Part-time residents form a significant share of the population, particularly in summer. Many were unfamiliar with how the service operated or found out about it late in the season. Survey responses suggest that this group may use the service more over time if information continues to be promoted at key arrival periods each year.

- **Early concerns about electric vehicles**

  A small number of residents were initially unsure about EV safety, including concerns about fire risk or charging. Volunteers noted that these concerns usually eased once people saw the vehicle in use or received a simple explanation. Information sessions also helped address concerns and build familiarity.

- **Donation clarity**

  Some respondents were unsure what donation was appropriate, particularly in Venus Bay where guidance was less explicit. Volunteers also reported that explaining donations could feel awkward. Sandy Point's clearer donation guidance helped reduce this uncertainty.

- **Information access and visibility**

  Residents who were not active online or who were less connected to local networks sometimes missed announcements or became aware of trips only after they occurred. Survey responses highlighted the need for more consistent promotion, including printed materials at local hubs.

- **Mobility equipment**

  While the bus could accommodate mobility aids, volunteers were cautious about safety procedures and confident operation of the lift. Many residents with disabilities used NDIS-funded transport, which was often cheaper and did not require volunteer coordination, so the e-Bus complemented rather than replaced existing options.

5.3 Operational models

Management arrangements

Management structures reflected the distinct contexts of the two towns. The Venus Bay Community Centre operates within an established organisational framework, with clear administrative systems, paid part-time staff and existing community programs. This provided a stable foundation for the e-Bus service and supported consistent record keeping, volunteer coordination and communication.

In contrast, Sandy Point established a new incorporated association specifically to operate the service. While effective, this created a heavier administrative burden for a small group of volunteers who were responsible for compliance, insurance, financial recording and documentation. Roles often overlapped, and responsibilities shifted when volunteers became unavailable or stepped back due to personal commitments.

Capacity remained a challenge in both towns. Operational tasks were concentrated among a limited number of volunteers, increasing the risk that essential knowledge and processes were held by only a few people. Volunteers noted the importance of clear documentation, especially for bookings, financial procedures, charging instructions and safety checks. Both towns articulated the need for succession planning to ensure continuity of the service as responsibilities evolve.

Each organisation worked closely with drivers and booking volunteers to refine processes over time. Each community adapted its approach as needs changed, reviewing policies and updating procedures to respond to issues as they arose. This ongoing adjustment was central to maintaining service continuity.

Operational challenges

1. **Vehicle suitability and comfort**

Feedback from passengers and volunteers highlighted several aspects of the vehicles chosen that shaped how the service was experienced. Ride quality on rural and unsealed roads was a recurring theme. Passengers in both towns noted that the ride could feel firm or bumpy, particularly on longer trips, which reflected the quality of the vehicle's suspension rather than the drivers' skills.

> *"The suspension is not great and some roads are rough. You learn where the bad spots are and slow right down, but it does add to the workload." (Volunteer driver, Sandy Point)*

Noise from the wheelchair equipment also contributed to discomfort for some passengers, and a few commented on inconsistent air circulation or heating and cooling during certain trips.

> *"The heating and cooling system is not straightforward. You press a button and you cannot really tell if anything has happened. You end up asking passengers to tell you if it feels any different." (Volunteer driver, Sandy Point)*

Several volunteers also pointed to practical difficulties with external fittings and interior usability, which occasionally affected the flow of trips.

> *"The step and the sliding door have caused problems and take ages to get fixed. We still do not have a proper manual. We need simple laminated cards showing how to operate things." (Volunteer driver, Sandy Point)*

The internal layout of the bus limited capacity for bags and mobility equipment. When the wheelchair space was in use, or when items were stored in the rear of the vehicle, luggage capacity became

restricted. Some passengers found it difficult to carry shopping or larger bags on group outings where available space needed to be shared.

Operational confidence was also shaped by the need to deal with the technical aspects of the electric vehicle. Volunteers described a learning curve in understanding the controls and interpreting what the vehicle was doing.

> *"The controls are not intuitive. Sometimes you press something and nothing happens. A simple manual in the bus would help, especially for new drivers." (Volunteer driver, Venus Bay)*

Navigation also created pressure for drivers, particularly during multi-stop pickups.

> *"I really miss having a built-in navigator. When you have several pickups at different addresses, you are using your phone and trying to work it out yourself. Navigation in the bus would make it much easier." (Volunteer driver, Venus Bay)*

Range and charging requirements further influenced operational flexibility. Drivers described early uncertainty about how battery performance changed with weather, passenger load or air-conditioning use. Public chargers were sometimes slow or incompatible with the bus cable, which limited options during longer regional trips.

> *"You have to watch the battery constantly, especially on hot days. When the air conditioner is on, you can really see the power drop. It is new technology and we are still getting used to it." (Volunteer driver, Venus Bay)*
>
> *"There are not enough chargers we can use because the charging cable does not fit everywhere. That is a big challenge for scheduling." (Volunteer driver, Sandy Point)*

Initial hesitation about electric vehicles was also noted. Some volunteers and passengers were unfamiliar with EV technology and expressed early concerns about reliability, charging and general safety. These concerns eased as volunteers gained experience with the vehicle and as passengers observed consistent service.

2. **Charging, energy use and range considerations**

Charging and energy use were central operational considerations for both communities. Volunteers described a learning curve in becoming confident with the process required to charge the vehicles. Volunteers also experienced the range indicator in the vehicle was not always a reliable indicator as weather, passenger load, use of air conditioning and the way the vehicle was driven influenced actual range. This occasionally limited the type and number of trips that could be offered in one day. Planning often had to include time for charging and knowledge of where suitable charging stations were for other locations.

Charging away from the home base introduced additional complexity. Public chargers were not always reliable, could be slow, and often required payment through smartphone apps, which some volunteers found challenging to use. These factors made longer regional trips more difficult to schedule and placed extra pressure on volunteers who needed to manage both charging logistics along with passenger expectations.

Electricity costs themselves were modest in absolute terms. Basic comparisons of fuel only indicated that the electric bus operated at roughly 12.5 cents per kilometre, compared with around 20 cents per kilometre for an equivalent diesel minibus, suggesting the potential for long-term savings. However, these financial advantages were sometimes offset by the practical challenges of rural charging, including the need to rely on limited compatible public infrastructure and occasional waiting times.

Maintenance and insurance added further operational demands. Both communities experienced vehicle quality issues, including rust developing shortly after delivery and several warranty repairs. Access to mechanics comfortable to service EVs in rural areas was limited, which slowed the resolution of mechanical problems and increased the workload for volunteers. Insurance remained a significant annual cost, increasing when claims were made, and both communities expressed concern about covering this once pilot funding ends.

3. **Accreditation and regulatory capacity**

There were questions about whether accreditation was required for the service, and this influenced early planning decisions. The electric minibuses were originally manufactured as 12-seat vehicles, but the modifications required to install a wheelchair position reduced the operational capacity to eight or nine seated passengers. This configuration placed the service within the category of small buses that STV indicated were exempt from accreditation according to the information available on its website in late 2023. As the service did not collect fares and was operated by not-for-profit community groups, stakeholders understood the exemption to apply. Early advice received at the start of the project confirmed this interpretation.

Sandy Point received an enquiry to transport school children on behalf of a local primary school and the first question asked was whether the service was accredited. The SPBMC embarked on a time-consuming process with STV and DTP to seek clarity about what was needed and why. As a result of this work, it became evident that many community transport operators in Victoria may not be accredited as required by the Bus Safety Act. Volunteers noted that the requirements of the Bus Safety Act and associated regulations were difficult to interpret without specialist expertise.

These local experiences reflected broader sector-wide challenges. Mapping work conducted by VTCTA (2024) found that community transport operates within a fragmented regulatory environment shaped by multiple agencies and inconsistent definitions across jurisdictions. In Victoria, community transport is not explicitly defined in transport regulations, contributing to uncertainty about which standards apply and when accreditation is required. Similar issues were observed across Australia, including variations in accreditation exemptions, driver authorisation requirements and interpretations of what constitutes community transport.

VTCTA (2024) also reported that operators frequently face overlapping regulatory requirements across transport, disability, aged care, volunteer safety and child-safe frameworks. This regulatory layering creates a substantial administrative burden for small volunteer-based organisations and limits their capacity to comply without specialist support.

In response to the concerns raised during this pilot, STV began reviewing its public guidance. Outdated or unclear website content has already been removed, and staged improvements are being implemented to enhance accuracy, usability, and overall clarity moving forward.

Despite these efforts, the regulatory environment remains difficult for small community groups to navigate. STV recognises the need for clearer guidance and more tailored support for volunteer-run services and is exploring ways to simplify accreditation processes and provide more accessible education and support, noting this work will take time to progress thoughtfully. They are open to working with DTP to implement reforms in the Act/legislation that may be required.

4. **Unscheduled downtime and maintenance needs**

Both communities experienced unplanned vehicle downtime. Mechanical faults, paint deterioration, electrical issues and damage from attempted theft in Venus Bay resulted in periods when the vehicle was unavailable. These disruptions required rapid adjustments to bookings and caused stress for volunteers responsible for managing expectations. The operational burden was significant, as volunteers had to coordinate repairs, liaise with mechanics and update passengers, who were largely understanding and supportive. In some situations, in both communities, volunteers went above and beyond, transporting passengers in their own vehicle to ensure a V/Line connection was made as requested when the e-Bus was suddenly unavailable. Their level of commitment to the delivery of services was and remains high.

5. **Scheduling complexity**

The service operated with a mixture of group outings, V/Line connections and ad hoc individual bookings. Managing this variety created a complex scheduling environment. Volunteers reported that short-notice requests were common and often required urgent coordination to identify a driver. Group outings helped to maximise vehicle use and introduced new passengers to the service, but they could constrain availability for individual bookings.

Scheduled services, such as weekly shopping trips in Venus Bay, helped consolidate demand but did not always attract sufficient passengers in the early stages. Over time, both communities successfully adapted their offerings to better match local preferences and needs.

Volunteer perspectives on service delivery

Interviews with volunteers provided a detailed picture of how the service was delivered in practice. Volunteers consistently expressed a strong commitment to supporting their communities, and many described their involvement as rewarding and socially meaningful. At the same time, their experiences highlighted the practical pressures of operating a small transport service with a limited workforce.

Drivers described the responsibility they felt when transporting passengers, particularly for journeys that involved time-sensitive V/Line connections, unfamiliar roads or poor weather conditions. Many arrived early, checked the vehicle and planned routes in advance to ensure punctuality. This sense of responsibility was especially strong among older volunteers, who wanted passengers to feel confident in the reliability of the service.

> *"Sometimes it can be a bit stressful. If someone is late or you cannot find them, and you are trying to get others to a V/Line connection, you do not want anyone to miss it. There is not another bus for hours, so you feel the pressure to make the timing work." (Volunteer driver, Sandy Point)*

Local road conditions shaped the driving role. Both towns have narrow, winding and at times damaged rural roads, which required volunteers to navigate potholes, wildlife and uneven surfaces. The firm suspension of the electric buses made drivers more aware of these conditions, and many adjusted their driving style by reducing speed, selecting smoother routes or allowing extra time to maintain comfort and safety.

Some volunteers also commented on features of the vehicle that made driving more demanding:

> *"The sliding door is very heavy and the step access needs improvement for accessibility. A vehicle with more storage for bags would be a big improvement, because people often have to hold heavy shopping on their knees. This could be a safety issue if the bus had to stop or swerve quickly. The process of starting and switching off the bus is also convoluted and could be easier for drivers." (Volunteer driver, Venus Bay)*

Drivers also noted the additional cognitive load involved in operating an electric vehicle. Monitoring remaining range, managing regenerative braking, interpreting charging behaviour and understanding how passenger load or weather affected battery performance were all part of the role. Although confidence improved over time, volunteers acknowledged that these tasks required concentration and sometimes created uncertainty during longer or less predictable trips.

Booking officers and coordinators also experienced pressure. They managed requests that arrived through multiple channels, responded to short-notice enquiries and coordinated drivers through group messaging. Several volunteers commented that they often felt on call even outside normal hours, and that the effort required to accommodate last-minute requests was stressful despite their desire to help passengers.

> *"You often feel a bit on call. People ring at the last minute or from the V/Line bus saying they need a pickup now. We always try to make it work, but it does create pressure." (Volunteer driver, Sandy Point)*
>
> *"To keep up with the booking officer role you really need constant access to your phone. For people who work or cannot use a phone during the day, it is almost impossible." (Volunteer driver, Venus Bay)*

Despite these pressures, the social aspect of volunteering was widely valued. Volunteers described conversations with passengers, meeting new people and feeling that their efforts made a meaningful contribution to community life. Many noted that word of mouth grew through these interactions and helped new users feel comfortable with the service. These social and community benefits are explored in more detail in the following chapter.

At the same time, volunteers reflected on the challenge of attracting and retaining a sustainable volunteer workforce. Several noted that the age profile of volunteers, combined with licensing requirements, created practical constraints.

> *"Most of us are retired, and once you are over 70 you are on VicRoads radar. Any medical issue and they can restrict your licence. That really affects the pool of available drivers." (Volunteer driver, Venus Bay)*

> *"We have to be conscious that we are an older group of drivers. As soon as VicRoads knows about any condition, they are quick to put limits on your licence." (Volunteer driver, Venus Bay)*

Fatigue and seasonal fluctuations added further pressure for volunteers, particularly during winter when fewer drivers were available.

> *"We will manage, but it will need careful attention to make sure things do not fall through the cracks. Several drivers are away at the same time, which makes winter challenging." (Volunteer driver, Sandy Point)*

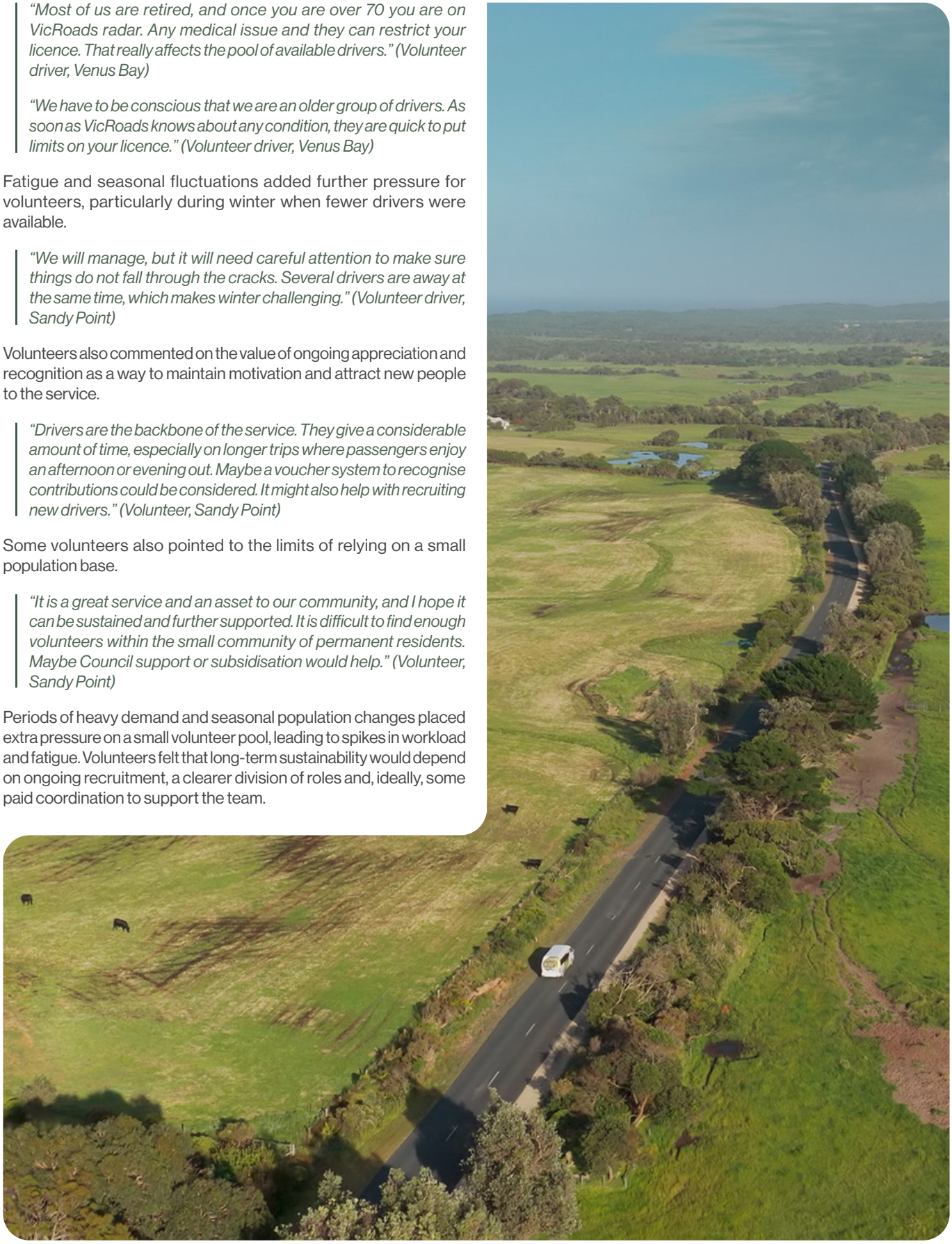
Volunteers also commented on the value of ongoing appreciation and recognition as a way to maintain motivation and attract new people to the service.

> *"Drivers are the backbone of the service. They give a considerable amount of time, especially on longer trips where passengers enjoy an afternoon or evening out. Maybe a voucher system to recognise contributions could be considered. It might also help with recruiting new drivers." (Volunteer, Sandy Point)*

Some volunteers also pointed to the limits of relying on a small population base.

> *"It is a great service and an asset to our community, and I hope it can be sustained and further supported. It is difficult to find enough volunteers within the small community of permanent residents. Maybe Council support or subsidisation would help." (Volunteer, Sandy Point)*

Periods of heavy demand and seasonal population changes placed extra pressure on a small volunteer pool, leading to spikes in workload and fatigue. Volunteers felt that long-term sustainability would depend on ongoing recruitment, a clearer division of roles and, ideally, some paid coordination to support the team.



5.4 Financial sustainability

Operating costs

Both communities faced significant pressure in meeting the ongoing operating costs of the service. Although the pilot covered major expenses during the trial period, the underlying cost structure became clearer as the service matured. Annual operating costs were estimated at approximately $12,000, including registration, insurance, scheduled servicing, roadside assistance, charging costs and basic consumables. Expenditure varied depending on trip frequency, the availability of local mechanics and the number of longer journeys completed.

Electricity costs were modest overall, and the electric vehicles performed at roughly 12.5 cents per kilometre, compared with about 20 cents per kilometre for an equivalent diesel minibus. The cost advantage was helpful but not transformative, as operational savings were often offset by the practical challenges of rural charging and the need for occasional top-ups at public charging stations which typically incurred higher fees.

Maintenance and insurance carried greater financial weight. The quality issues encountered with the vehicles generated repeated warranty work, including rust treatment and mechanical repairs, and both towns described delays in accessing EV servicing expertise in regional areas. These interruptions created uncertainty for volunteers planning trips and managing bookings. They also highlight that the pilot was testing relatively new electric vehicle technology in a rural context, and that both communities were learning how to operate and maintain an emerging transport option without established regional servicing pathways.

Figure 5: Wonton-making fundraiser for the e-Bus in Venus Bay

Donations and pricing perceptions

Passenger donations made an important contribution to operating costs although the extent of revenue varied between the towns. Sandy Point adopted a donations-based model early on and developed a suggested donation guide that helped residents understand expected contributions. Monthly donations averaged $838 in 2024 and increased to around $1,102 in 2025. Sandy Point also benefitted from its geographic position and community connections, which attracted occasional financial contributions from organisations such as Marinus Link. These contributions helped stabilise day-to-day operations, although they were not a predictable or recurring source of income.

Venus Bay initially offered a free service. This decision helped establish trust in the early months but it also created longer-term expectations that travel would not incur a cost for passengers. Setting no early expectation of even a modest payment made it harder to introduce a contribution model later in the pilot, and volunteers noted that a small, symbolic fare may have helped establish clearer norms from the outset. The town's socio-economic profile, combined with the Community Centre's culture of providing many free or low-cost programs and the long-running free summer beach shuttle, further shaped perceptions of whether payment was necessary. Contributions increased once guidance became more explicit, with average monthly contributions in 2024 around $112, but increased to around $345 in 2025. Donation revenue remained inconsistent and depended heavily on volunteer communication and community goodwill.

Both communities also offered private hire and charter services. These were used for local events, tourism related activities and group outings. In Sandy Point, private hire trips to destinations such as Gurneys Cidery, which also functions as a wedding venue, provided supplementary income that contributed to annual operating costs. These earnings were valuable but fluctuated seasonally and did not reach the scale required to build reserves for vehicle replacement.

Survey comments and interviews highlighted common confusion about why donations were required when the vehicles were supplied by government. Volunteers frequently needed to explain that the pilot did not fund ongoing operating costs, and that contributions were essential to keep the service running. These conversations occasionally created awkwardness for drivers and booking volunteers who wished to avoid deterring passengers or appearing to pressure people.

Administrative costs

Administrative costs were significant even though most labour was provided by volunteers. Essential expenses included smartphones, web hosting, digital booking tools, organisation insurance, office supplies, and vehicle storage. Additional time and cost were associated with booking management, financial reporting, volunteer coordination, compliance documentation and public communication activities. Venus Bay's access to established administrative systems helped to spread this workload, while Sandy Point's newly formed association carried a heavier burden due to limited personnel and a smaller organisational base. The introduction of charters and sponsorship arrangements, while beneficial financially, also created additional administrative requirements.

Submitting applications for grant or sponsorship funding also added to administrative demands. Volunteers dedicated substantial time to researching funding opportunities and preparing the submissions. Additionally, they were responding to queries and completing reporting requirements. In several cases, the effort invested outweighed the financial return, yet the absence of reliable recurrent funding left no alternative.

Need for paid staffing

Many volunteers in both towns indicated that some paid administrative support would improve service sustainability, with particularly strong views expressed in Venus Bay. Volunteers reported fatigue arising from the constant coordination required to manage bookings, driver availability, communications, maintenance planning and community enquiries. The work involved exceeded initial expectations, and the presence of a paid coordinator during the pilot provided stability that volunteers were concerned would be difficult to replicate once funding tapered.

A small number of paid hours each week was seen as essential to oversee bookings, manage volunteer communication, support compliance tasks and handle the growing administrative load. Without this support, responsibility risked concentrating on a very small group of volunteers, increasing the likelihood of burnout and disrupting continuity if individuals stepped back.

Long-term funding viability

Long-term financial viability emerged as one of the most pressing challenges of the pilot. While donations, charter income, and one-off grants can support day-to-day operations, neither community is able to finance the eventual replacement of the vehicle. The capital cost of a new electric minibus far exceeds local fundraising capacity, particularly considering the need for ongoing contributions toward insurance, registration and charging infrastructure. It would require many years of sustained and unusual levels of community giving. This creates a structural limitation rather than a shortcoming of the model. Even in Sandy Point, where operational income was comparatively strong, capital replacement remains out of reach.

Industry advice also suggests that electric minibuses deliver cost efficiencies only at much higher annual kilometres than community transport services typically operate. This further limits the ability of small volunteer organisations to achieve financial sustainability through operational savings alone.

The pilot period made clear that day-to-day operational costs can be covered through a combination of donations, charter income, volunteer labour and periodic grants, but that these sources alone do not generate the level of financial certainty required to plan beyond short timeframes. The cost of eventual vehicle replacement remained outside the realistic fundraising capacity of both communities, and neither town was able to identify a feasible pathway to meeting this cost within existing resources. These financial pressures shaped how each organisation viewed the future of the service and influenced decisions about administrative effort, fundraising priorities, and service planning.

5.5 Conclusion

The operational experience of the pilot demonstrates that a volunteer-led, demand-responsive electric bus service can function effectively in small rural towns and deliver valued mobility where no public transport exists. Across the two years, demand increased steadily in both communities, with residents using the service for social outings, essential-needs trips and regional connections they would otherwise have struggled to reach. Many passengers reported that they would not have travelled at all without the e-Bus, which highlights the extent of unmet mobility needs and the gap this model helped to fill.

Although the broad service aims were shared, the pilot ultimately operated through two distinct local models that were shaped by each town's management structures, demographics and patterns of mobility.

Venus Bay delivered the service through the established Venus Bay Community Centre, which provided formalised administrative processes, staff support and integration with existing programs. This structure offered organisational resilience but also shaped community expectations: residents accustomed to free or subsidised services, including the long-running seasonal beach shuttle, were less inclined or able to make donation-based contributions. The town's higher proportion of residents on fixed or lower incomes reinforced this dynamic. Trip patterns centred on essential-needs travel, often involving multi-stop journeys, which created substantial coordination effort for volunteers.

In contrast, Sandy Point operated through a newly formed community committee, giving the service flexibility but relying heavily on a small volunteer pool. The community's smaller, more affluent demographic meant suggested donations were easier to introduce, even though some passengers could not afford to contribute and were always carried regardless. Usage grew initially through social outings and group activities, and over time focused strongly on V/Line connections, which introduced time pressure for drivers and added cognitive load for booking coordinators. These operational differences reflect the distinct social and economic characteristics of each community.

Despite these contrasts, both communities faced shared pressures. Volunteer drivers and booking coordinators reported meaningful and rewarding interactions with passengers, yet the workload was considerable and concentrated among a limited number of people. The risk of burnout was present in both towns, emerging through different pathways: through the administrative intensity of Venus Bay's essential service model, and the scheduling pressure and reliance on a small core group in Sandy Point. Both services also required ongoing adaptation to seasonal population changes, fluctuating volunteer availability and varied digital confidence among passengers.

The electric vehicles performed reliably overall but required ongoing learning and careful management, particularly as the pilot was testing relatively new technology in a rural setting. Rural road conditions, limited luggage and storage space, complex controls, inconsistent public charging infrastructure and occasional mechanical faults contributed to operational inefficiencies and increased volunteer workload. Experiences in both towns demonstrate that while electric minibuses can be viable in regional settings, their successful operation depends on appropriate vehicle selection, infrastructure support and clear maintenance pathways.

Financial sustainability remained a significant challenge. While donations, local fundraising and occasional charter income helped absorb operating costs, neither town could establish the level of financial certainty required for long-term planning. In Venus Bay, the town's socio-economic profile and the Community Centre's history of offering free or low-cost community services, including the long-running seasonal beach shuttle, limited the potential to introduce contribution models. The experience also showed that establishing even a modest contribution expectation early can support long-term sustainability. Sandy Point attracted more community and organisational donations, including occasional support from external partners linked to its geographic setting such as Marinus Link, which helped it manage day-to-day costs. However, this success is highly context specific and does not translate into full self-sufficiency. Insurance, maintenance and administrative demands place pressure on both communities, and the cost of future vehicle replacement remains well beyond local means. These patterns reinforce that even relatively strong community transport models depend on some form of external investment.

Overall, the pilot shows that there is no single community transport model that suits all contexts, even between neighbouring towns. Venus Bay and Sandy Point each shaped the service to fit their management structures, demographics and travel needs, producing different but equally valuable models of community-led transport. Together, they demonstrate the adaptability and commitment of small communities, as well as the limits of relying solely on volunteer labour and informal or ad hoc sources of funding.

When considering the operational data, it is important to recognise that usage levels in small rural communities are shaped by structural factors such as population size, seasonal patterns, volunteer availability and the nature of local trip needs. Community transport in low density areas does not operate on the same scale or frequency as conventional public services, and trip volumes are typically modest even in well-established programs. Within this context, the level of demand observed in both towns is consistent with broader sector experience and reflects a realistic pattern of engagement for community led transport in settings of this scale.

These operational insights form an essential foundation for the next chapter, which examines the social, economic and environmental impacts that flowed from service delivery, and for the system-level considerations addressed in Chapter 7.

6 Assessing impacts for communities

The impacts of the Gippsland Community e-Bus Pilot are assessed through the domains of social inclusion, economic participation and environmental sustainability. These domains form the framework for evaluating outcomes and experiences across both communities and are consistent with the wider literature on community transport and community capacity and resilience.

The evaluation draws on several sources of evidence collected across the two-year pilot. These include:

- **Three community surveys**
- **Interviews and focus groups with passengers, volunteers and community leaders**
- **Operational and booking data showing use**
- **Observational insights gathered by the research team**
- **Regular operational feedback provided by the locally based engagement officers**

Together, the evidence sources offer complementary insights into how the service operated, how it was experienced, and the nature of changes observed within the community. Further detail on the methodological approach is provided in Appendix B.

6.1 Social outcomes: access, inclusion and community wellbeing

The pilot delivered clear social benefits in both communities, with social outcomes emerging as the strongest and most consistent findings of the evaluation. This reflects the demographic profile of Venus Bay and Sandy Point, where ageing populations, geographic isolation and limited transport options heighten the importance of mobility, connection and informal support networks. The service improved access to essential services and community activities, and it supported residents who face barriers to mobility due to age, health conditions, lack of a private vehicle or reduced confidence driving on rural roads. Evidence from surveys, interviews and observations indicates that these social benefits were central to the value of the pilot, shaping residents' independence, social participation and overall wellbeing.

Improved access to services and essential activities

Residents in both communities reported that the e-Bus improved their ability to reach essential services and everyday destinations, though the pattern of use differed between towns. Survey responses show that access to groceries, shops and medical care was a major benefit in Venus Bay, where many households rely on nearby regional centres for weekly needs. Interviews reinforced that several residents had few realistic alternatives, either because of cost pressures or the absence of local services. As one Venus Bay passenger explained:

> *"The pension is not enough, no money, it is very hard. We never had super so now it is not enough to live on. I have big bills like insurance and electricity, and everything here is expensive. There are not many shops and it is a very isolated place. We need the bus because it takes us to the shops." (Mary, Venus Bay resident)*

Figure 6: Venus Bay residents travelling to Wonthaggi on a scheduled shopping trip.

Another interview involved a daughter translating for her mother, who does not speak English and cannot drive. She explained that the bus had become essential for helping her mother manage everyday tasks and remain independent in a town with limited services:

> *"It makes her life so much more convenient. She does not know how to drive or the roads, so getting the bus to go to Wonthaggi or Leongatha is what she relies on. She said the bus makes her feel looked after by the community and the government, and she has made new friends." (Resident, Venus Bay)*

The daughter also noted that her mother had considered moving back to Melbourne because of the isolation and lack of transport options, but the introduction of the bus changed that:

> *"She even thought she would move back to Melbourne because it felt very inconvenient, but the bus made her stay. Now it is so convenient. It is the highlight of the week."*

This experience was not limited to people who had lived in Melbourne. New arrivals from more accessible parts of Gippsland also described similar challenges when settling in Venus Bay. One resident described the struggle of moving from a more accessible town where shops, public transport and services were all within walking distance. She explained that she relocated because rising rents made her previous home unaffordable, but the move left her without access to basic services and with no social connections. For her, the first month was particularly difficult until she discovered the e-Bus, which she now uses for shopping, errands and to reach places such as the post office in Tarwin Lower that she cannot access independently:

> *"Where I was living before I could walk to everything, the shops, the train, the beach. Here my first month was really hard until I found out about the bus. I moved because my rent went up by $110 a week and I could not afford it anymore. It is very isolating here and we cannot get services. We can't get them down here and the bus stops at the post office for us to check our mail because we don't get mail here either. It is very, very isolated." (Resident, Venus Bay)*

Her experience reflects a wider pattern noted by volunteer drivers, who observed that many residents face practical barriers to travelling independently, even when they own a car. Limited confidence driving longer distances or beyond familiar local roads was a common challenge:

> *"Many of the regulars have cut back on driving or they do not like going beyond the local roads. The bus makes it easier for them because they do not have to worry about the longer distances." (Volunteer driver, Venus Bay)*

Another resident of Venus Bay also spoke about relying on the e-Bus after his car was badly damaged in a collision with a kangaroo, describing the difficulties of reaching essential services without private transport. His experience illustrates the limited alternatives available for residents who need to access specialist or routine medical care in nearby towns:

> *"A kangaroo hit my car and wrote it off, so I did not have a car. It is very difficult to live down here if you do not have one, and I needed to get to Melbourne. I tried the bus and it felt a bit like being in an old wagon with everyone chatting away, but it was lovely and so I took it because I had to. Another time I had to get to a specialist in Wonthaggi and the only way I could manage it was to take the community bus to Leongatha and then Wonthaggi and back again. It took me 7 hours. A taxi from Leongatha to Wonthaggi and back would have been about $120, so that was not possible for me. Later I found out that I could hire the bus for $40, which is cheaper than a taxi but still expensive when you are on a pension. I can get to Melbourne for $5 on V/Line, so I have had to get dropped off to the bus as well. I have hired it twice and I have caught it once or twice." (Tom, Venus Bay)*

For him, the bus was the only feasible way to travel to Wonthaggi for a specialist appointment, and coordinating connections through Leongatha highlighted the time and effort required when no other options were available. These experiences align with survey findings, which show that many Venus Bay respondents found the service made it easier to attend health appointments, shop or combine several errands into a single trip.

In Sandy Point, access to essential services was valued but less central to how residents used the service. Interviewees noted that most people still drove independently and tended to use the e-Bus for social outings, trips to nearby towns and community events rather than for weekly shopping or medical needs. This reflects the fact that Sandy Point is even more isolated, with no local services beyond a small general store, and, as mentioned earlier, ABS data shows that average car ownership in the town is higher than the Victorian average.

Several residents highlighted that the bus provided a safe alternative for those who preferred not to drive at night or on rural roads where wildlife was a concern. One participant explained:

> *"Usually we would drive places, but one of the things I think the bus would be great for is driving at night. I don't like driving at night around here because of all the animals." (Grace, Sandy Point)*

Others noted that the service helped residents avoid driving after drinking when attending evening events, especially social nights and bowls. One resident put it simply:

> *"If you're having a couple of drinks, it's good to have the bus there so you can get a lift home safely." (Mark, Sandy Point)*

These comments show that Sandy Point residents primarily used the e-Bus as a safe and convenient transport option, which aligns with the operational findings.

Respondents in both communities also indicated that they would not have travelled at all without the e-Bus, reflecting the practical transport barriers faced when essential services are located outside the town and driving is not always feasible. Between 28 and 30 per cent of respondents reported that they would have skipped their trip entirely if the service had not been available. While this has implications for social participation, it also underlines the extent to which the e-Bus filled critical gaps in access to shops, health care and other everyday destinations.

Reduced social isolation and increased participation

Reducing loneliness and creating regular opportunities for social contact emerged as one of the strongest outcomes of the e-Bus in both towns. Many residents said the service helped them meet people, feel connected and maintain a sense of routine in places where casual interaction is limited, particularly during winter.

One Sandy Point resident described the importance of these connections:

> *"You need a social connection... isolation is the thing that really gets to people." (Helen, Sandy Point)*

Another passenger in Venus Bay spoke about how the bus helped her form friendships after moving to the town:

> *"When I came here, I didn't know anyone... slowly, slowly now I know people. "The bus is where I've made my friends." (Maria, Sandy Point)*

A resident who works from home shared how the outings supported his wellbeing:

> *"Sometimes working from home for days, I feel like I'm going crazy. I need to get out and see real people." (David, Venus Bay)*

Drivers also observed that people join trips as much for the company as for the transport. One volunteer explained:

> *"Some people use the bus even if they don't really need it for the errands. It's the social side they enjoy." (Graham, Sandy Point)*

One Venus Bay passenger explained that what appears to be a simple shopping trip is, for her, a vital way of staying connected and maintaining her wellbeing:

> *"I go on all the trips because otherwise I would have nothing. I'd have nowhere to go and nothing to do. I had friends before, but they're three hours away now, and my children all live at least an hour and a half or two hours away. So to me, the bus is my link to the outside world. It's for health, for being social, and for peace of mind." (Ruth, Venus Bay)*

Many passengers also described the bus as a place where friendships formed naturally. Several people said they had arrived in town not knowing anyone and that the e-Bus became one of the only regular opportunities to meet new people in a relaxed way.

> *"When I first came here, I didn't know anyone. Now I've made friends on the bus and we look out for each other." (Lina, Venus Bay)*

Figure 7: Passengers who met through the e-Bus. Even with a language barrier, the bus has helped them build a friendship.

Many residents said the e-Bus created an easy, low-pressure environment for meeting people, especially for those who were new to the area or lived alone. Passengers spoke about how casual conversations on the bus often grew into ongoing friendships, helping them feel part of the community more quickly than they expected. One Sandy Point resident reflected on how fast these social connections developed:

> *"You meet people you wouldn't otherwise meet. You start chatting and the next time you get on, it's like seeing friends again." (Jan, Sandy Point)*

Others described the bus as one of the few places in their week where spontaneous conversation happened. For some, the social interaction was as valuable as the trip itself:

> *"The chatting is half the trip. That's where the friendships start." (Mira, Venus Bay)*

Several passengers also noted that many of their local relationships now trace back to shared bus journeys, showing how central the service has become to everyday social life:

> *"The bus is how I've met most of the people I know here." (Sandra, Sandy Point)*

Figure 8: "We met on the bus."

Enhanced opportunities for shared community experiences

Group trips and community outings became one of the most visible and socially valued aspects of the service, particularly in Sandy Point but also strongly recognised in Venus Bay. Residents consistently described these outings as a catalyst for connection, helping both newcomers and long-term locals form friendships and participate in activities they might otherwise skip. Regular trips to concerts, film nights, gardens, lunches, barefoot bowls and local events created a shared social rhythm in each town, with passengers emphasising that the journey itself was part of the enjoyment.

Survey results strongly reflect this experience. In Venus Bay, 76 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the e-Bus made them feel more connected to their community, with more than half (52.9 per cent) selecting strongly agree (Figure 8 a). Sandy Point responses were similarly positive: 75 per cent agreed or strongly agreed, including 55.8 per cent who strongly agreed (Figure 8 b). These findings demonstrate that community connectedness was not simply an incidental benefit of the service but a core social outcome emerging from its design and usage patterns.

Figure 9 a: Perceived increase in community connectedness, Venus Bay - final community survey 2025

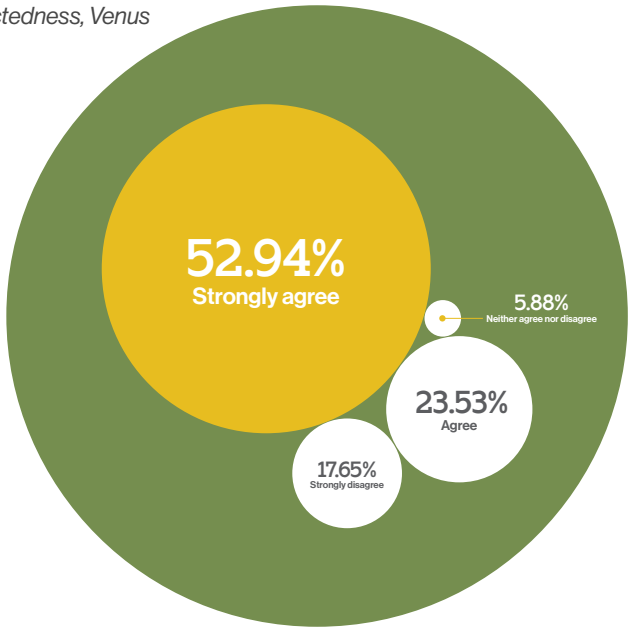
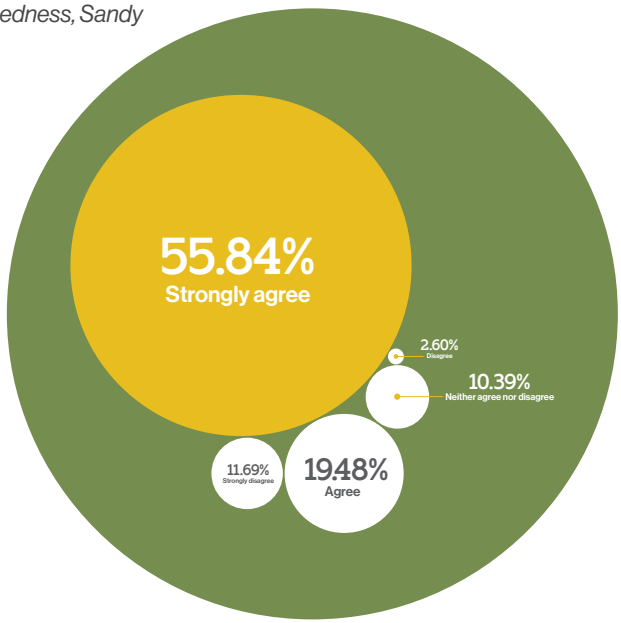


Figure 9 b: Perceived increase in community connectedness, Sandy Point - final community survey 2025



Interview participants described the group outings as a social anchor in towns where opportunities for informal, low-barrier socialising are otherwise limited. One resident called the e-Bus "a hub for meeting people", explaining that group activities no longer depended on organising multiple cars or nominating a designated driver. As one Sandy Point resident explained:

> *"It's a great way of interacting with people. We went to bowls, movies, concerts, shopping... a group of us gets together and off we go." (Kate, Sandy Point)*

Another described the value of these shared outings for building cohesion over time:

> *"It has been brilliant for social cohesion. People talk about the trips for weeks after. It brings the community together." (Judy, Sandy Point)*

Drivers also reflected on how the communal nature of the outings strengthened social ties, with group chatter, sing-alongs and shared meals making the bus feel like a social space as much as a mode of transport. One driver noted how even simple excursions created a lasting sense of enjoyment for passengers:

> *"We went on a cold, miserable day to Inverloch, just to look around and have lunch. People talked about that trip for ages afterwards. It really brought everyone together." (Sue, Sandy Point)*

Residents described how the service made these activities accessible to those who might otherwise stay home, especially single people and new arrivals. As one participant put it:

> *"Every time you go on the bus there are different people, and everybody chats. It's a wonderful social thing." (Glenis, Sandy Point)*

These accounts show that the e-Bus became far more than a transport service: it provided a reliable, enjoyable and socially meaningful way for residents to connect with others. For many, the shared outings were central to building friendships and a stronger sense of community life.

Volunteers' sense of purpose

These shared outings also relied heavily on the enthusiasm and commitment of the volunteer drivers, many of whom described the work as personally meaningful. Several drivers said that being involved in these group trips gave them a sense of purpose and connection, particularly those who lived alone or were new to the area. One driver explained how the role became an important part of his week, providing both structure and social connection:

> *"It gives me something to look forward to. I get to be part of the community and see people enjoying themselves. I feel like I'm doing something good." (Peter, Sandy Point)*

Drivers spoke not only about the practical responsibility of running trips but also about the enjoyment they experienced through interactions with passengers. A Venus Bay driver described the atmosphere on group outings:

> *"You can feel the mood lift when people get on the bus. They're happy, they're chatting, and you know the trip means something to them. It feels good to help make that happen." (Daniel, Venus Bay)*

Others highlighted that volunteering helped them build friendships and feel more rooted in their community. One driver who had moved to the coast shortly before the pilot said:

> *"Driving the bus helped me meet people. I got to know the locals really quickly, and it made me feel like I belonged here." (Helen, Sandy Point)*

Another described how the role supported his own wellbeing:

> *"I live on my own, so the bus gets me out and about. It keeps me connected. I get just as much out of it as the passengers do." (Brian, Venus Bay)*

Figure 10: A proud volunteer driver supporting community mobility and social connection

Drivers also commented on the culture that formed around the service. Many described a gradual shift from simple transport to shared social experiences, with conversations, laughter and informal rituals becoming part of the trips. As one put it:

> *"It's more than just driving. People trust you, they tell you what's going on in their lives, and you become part of that little circle." (Daniel, Sandy Point)*

For many volunteers, the motivation was also shaped by a sense of 'future self-insurance' – an understanding that they may one day rely on the service themselves:

> *"One day I might not be able to drive. Having this here matters." (Helen, Sandy Point volunteer)*

For some volunteers, motivation was also shaped by environmental values. One driver described how the opportunity to support a low-emissions transport option aligned with his personal commitment to reducing car use and contributing to climate action:

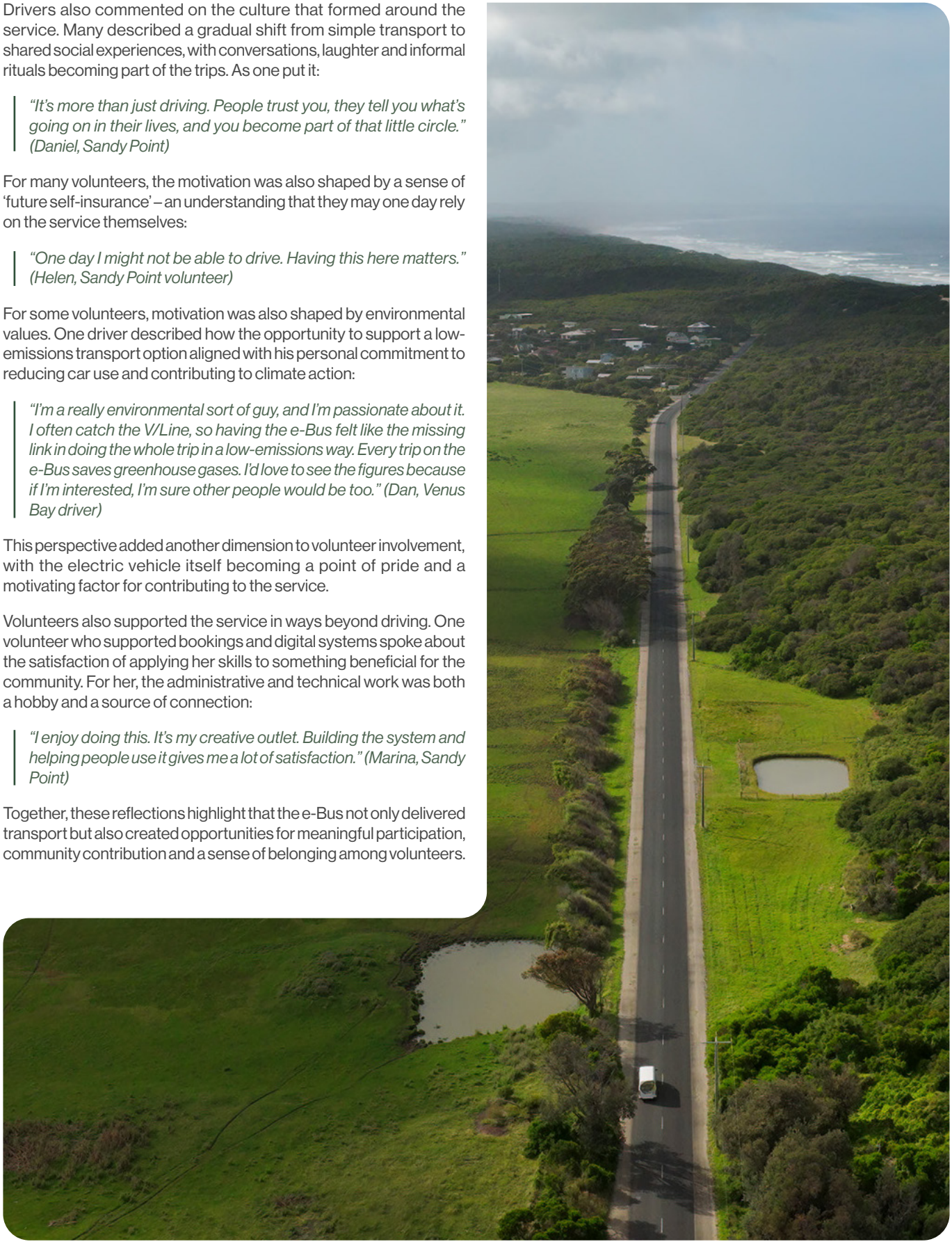
> *"I'm a really environmental sort of guy, and I'm passionate about it. I often catch the V/Line, so having the e-Bus felt like the missing link in doing the whole trip in a low-emissions way. Every trip on the e-Bus saves greenhouse gases. I'd love to see the figures because if I'm interested, I'm sure other people would be too." (Dan, Venus Bay driver)*

This perspective added another dimension to volunteer involvement, with the electric vehicle itself becoming a point of pride and a motivating factor for contributing to the service.

Volunteers also supported the service in ways beyond driving. One volunteer who supported bookings and digital systems spoke about the satisfaction of applying her skills to something beneficial for the community. For her, the administrative and technical work was both a hobby and a source of connection:

> *"I enjoy doing this. It's my creative outlet. Building the system and helping people use it gives me a lot of satisfaction." (Marina, Sandy Point)*

Together, these reflections highlight that the e-Bus not only delivered transport but also created opportunities for meaningful participation, community contribution and a sense of belonging among volunteers.



6.2 Economic outcomes: cost savings, local benefit and participation

Building on the social impacts outlined above, the service also delivered a range of economic benefits for households, volunteers and the wider community. These included reduced travel costs for residents with limited transport choices, improved access to essential services and volunteering opportunities, increased local spending linked to group travel, and the substantial operational value generated through volunteer drivers. While social outcomes dominated, the pilot also produced meaningful economic benefits that contributed to community-level economic activity.

Reduced travel costs for residents

For many residents, particularly those with limited transport options, the e-Bus provided a lower-cost alternative to private vehicle use. Survey data from both towns shows that a notable portion of users would not have made their trip without the service: 30 per cent in Sandy Point and 29 per cent in Venus Bay. This indicates that, for these residents, the bus helped avoid the unavoidable costs associated with alternative transport, such as fuel, parking, or hiring a taxi (if feasible).

Even when passengers did have access to a private vehicle, the shared nature of the service reduced the cost per person of longer trips to major towns. Several interviewees described choosing the e-Bus because it allowed them to "save the car" for essential journeys or avoid the wear, tear, and fuel costs of regular long-distance driving. For others, particularly older adults or people with temporary loss of access to a car (due to repairs or vehicle damage), the e-Bus provided an affordable way to maintain mobility without incurring unplanned expenses.

Residents also noted that the service removed the need to leave their car parked for extended periods when connecting with V/Line services at Fish Creek, avoiding concerns about vehicle theft or damage. This combination of avoided expenses and lower-cost travel contributed modest but meaningful savings at the household level, particularly for those on fixed or limited incomes.

Increased ability to participate in local spending

The e-Bus service enabled residents to participate in local shopping, social activities and community events that they may not otherwise have been able or willing to attend. Survey data indicates that social activities were the most common reason for travel in both Sandy Point (43.5 per cent) and Venus Bay (30.2 per cent), followed by shopping and group outings. These trip purposes inherently involve spending on items such as meals, groceries, tickets or purchases at markets, which in turn support local businesses.

Figure 11a: Trip purpose distribution, Sandy Point - final community survey 2025

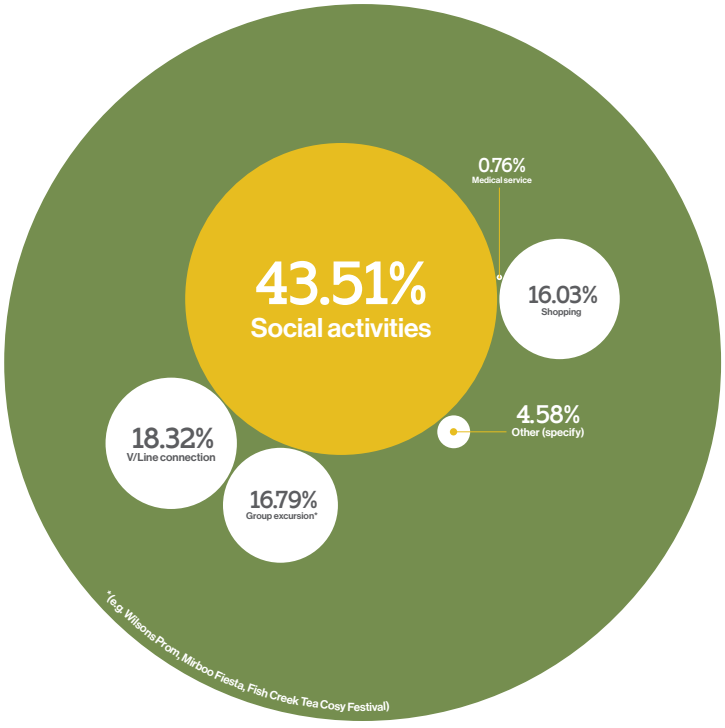
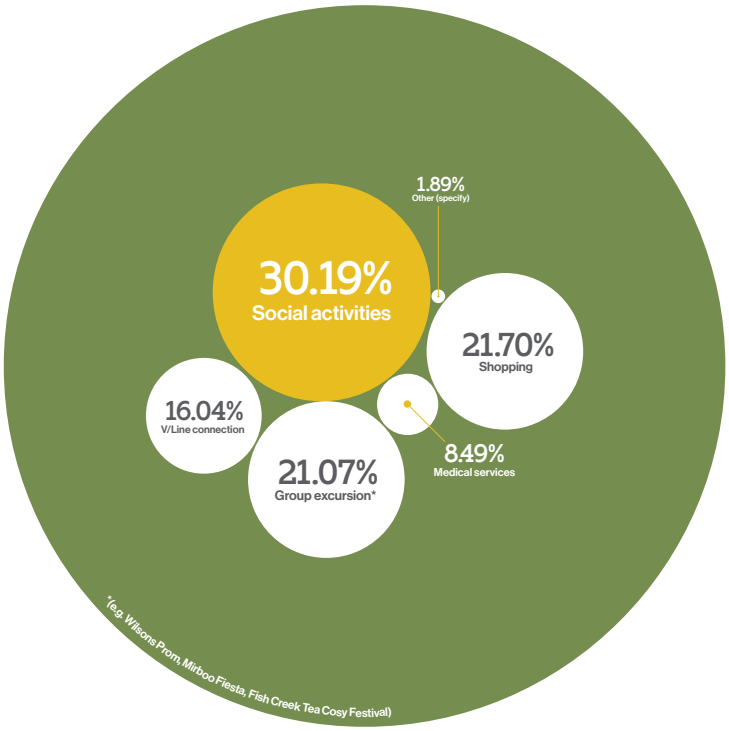


Figure 11 b: Trip purpose distribution, Venus Bay - final community survey 2025



Venus Bay

What did you use the e-Bus for?

Interview and survey comments reinforce this pattern. Several residents described spending money during outings, whether on food, shopping or event entry. One Sandy Point respondent explained how the service supported local businesses by making group visits feasible:

> *"We were able to catch the bus to the local winery without the need for a designated driver. More sales for the local business." (Source: final community survey, 2025)*

Passengers from both towns provided similar accounts during interviews, noting that the e-Bus allowed them to attend lunches, bowls, film nights, markets and other outings that they would have been unlikely to undertake without shared transport. For some residents, particularly those on fixed incomes or with limited driving confidence, the availability of the service made these additional activities possible.

The service also enabled attendance at special events, including community markets, the Tarwin Lower twilight events, Wilsons Promontory tours and country race meetings. These activities brought people into local towns and attractions, increasing patronage for hospitality and event operators. Even at modest scale, this increased participation represents an economic uplift for small coastal communities where visitor expenditure and local patronage are important for sustaining businesses and services.

Support for local tourism

The e-Bus also supported local tourism by improving access for people visiting friends and relatives, as well as short-term visitors staying in Sandy Point and Venus Bay. Survey comments noted that the service made it easier for visitors to move around d the area, particularly during peak seasons, with several commenting that tourists appreciated the beach runs and the ability to travel without relying on private vehicles.

Interviews provided further evidence of this contribution. Drivers in Venus Bay described frequent use of the bus by tourists and young people travelling to beaches, markets and coastal activities, especially in summer. One Sandy Point driver explained that the bus had been used repeatedly for trips to local tourism destinations, noting:

> *"We've done the winery, we've been to the winery, we've been to Gurney's... quite a few of the local tourism things as well." (Daniel, Sandy Point driver)*

Drivers also observed that the service was helpful for groups of tourists wanting to go out in the evening without needing to organise designated drivers. As one participant put it:

> *"The bus is useful for big groups of tourists who want a night at the pub or similar that all want to drink." (Source: final community survey, 2025)*

Passengers in Sandy Point explained that the service made it easier for visiting friends and family to join local outings such as lunches, winery visits and trips to Wilsons Promontory. They noted that having the bus available meant guests could take part in community activities without relying on additional cars, which increased group participation in local venues and events.

These recreational and social outings brought people into local venues and attractions, supporting hospitality operators, markets and tourism-oriented businesses. Although the scale was modest, the pattern of use shows that the e-Bus played a role in enabling visitor participation in local activities and events, contributing to the local economy in towns where seasonal tourism is an important part of community life.

Improved access to public transport

Alongside its role in supporting local tourism, the e-Bus also strengthened regional mobility by improving access to V/Line services at Fish Creek and to key service centres such as Wonthaggi and Leongatha. People of different ages made use of this connection. While many older adults relied on the service to avoid long-distance driving, several residents also noted that it made travel easier for teenagers and adult children visiting from Melbourne, who could move around the area independently. This showed that the value of the service was not limited to one demographic but supported wider household travel patterns.

Survey responses indicate that this link to public transport was one of the most appreciated aspects of the service. Half of Sandy Point respondents and one third of Venus Bay respondents reported a significant improvement in their ability to connect with public transport. Many described the relief of not needing to leave a car parked for days at Fish Creek. As one resident explained:

> *"Getting to and from the V/Line is a huge bonus, not having to leave your car overnight at a stop." (Source: final community survey, 2025)*

Interview participants described similar benefits. Drivers noted that even single-passenger V/Line connections were important, particularly for people who could not or did not want to drive long distances. One Sandy Point driver reflected on these small but meaningful trips:

> *"You are providing that service for somebody who otherwise may not have been able to get to Sandy Point and enjoy their time down here." (Gary, Sandy Point driver)*

Several residents and drivers also spoke about the comfort of avoiding unfamiliar or stressful driving conditions, including night-time travel and wildlife hazards, which commonly deter people from making longer trips. One resident highlighted that avoiding long-term parking meant they could travel to Melbourne more often, reducing both cost and anxiety:

> *"Being able to make connections with V/Line services without leaving my car in a public carpark for up to a week means I can travel to family in Melbourne more often."(Source: final community survey, 2025)*

The service reduced the cost and risk linked to car-based travel and provided a practical connection to the regional transport network. For some, it was an alternative when their own car was unavailable; for others, it enabled visits that would otherwise be postponed or avoided. These experiences indicate that the service supported a wider range of travel needs and reduced the financial and practical burden associated with relying solely on private vehicles.

Employment and education

While the e-Bus improved access to regional services and public transport, it did not generate measurable workforce-related economic outcomes. Survey responses show very limited use of the service for employment or education trips. This is mainly due to the demographic profile of both communities, where many residents are older, semi-retired or not active in the labour market, as well as the relatively small number of young adults living locally. Both towns are also located in remote areas where employment opportunities are limited, meaning that improving access to work was unlikely to be a major outcome of the pilot.

Residents and drivers confirmed this pattern during interviews, explaining that most local employment is home-based, seasonal or within short driving distance, reducing the need for a commuting service. As a result, the pilot did not shift labour-market participation or expand access to work in a measurable way.

Some interviewees also observed that community transport services, if implemented more widely in regional or rural areas, may need additional paid roles alongside volunteers. Although this was beyond the scope of the pilot, similar services in comparable communities could generate limited local employment where demand supports ongoing staffing.

Although workforce outcomes were limited, there were some indications that the e-Bus supported educational access for specific groups of students. In Sandy Point, the service played a role in helping students from Foster Secondary College attend the Bellum Bellum blended learning hub in Morwell for specialised subjects such as advanced mathematics and physics for a short period of time. These trips would otherwise have required families to coordinate long return drives of more than an hour each way.

The service also supported occasional youth activities. One local councillor and volunteer driver described organising a full bus of teenagers to attend a regional youth disco, highlighting the unmet transport needs of younger residents:

> *"We have got a growing population and more young people, more families, but no public transport. I have been a big supporter of the project from day one, and I have ended up being the party bus driver. There might be a music gig on at the Tarwin Hall, for example, or runs for the market day, and I have done a couple of those.*
>
> *But the big one for me, and a magic thing about this bus, is how it can support young people. South Gippsland Council has been trying to engage with young people more meaningfully, and they have started a youth council which has been going for a year and a bit now. The youth council put on a disco for youth from all across South Gippsland, and it was held in Mirboo North.*
>
> *It was all very last minute, but I put the call out and said, 'Look, I am taking my kid to the disco. Are there other interested people?' And I ended up with a full bus of kids from the area going to the disco, connecting with kids from all over South Gippsland.*
>
> *We also had a youth forum the other day as part of developing our council plan, and I asked young people, 'What is the hardest thing about living in South Gippsland?' Every single one of them said public transport. Even kids who have regular buses because they are on the V/Line route still cannot get to activities or meet friends. It is not like living in a city where something comes every half hour and you can just get around." (Jessica, South Gippsland Shire representative and volunteer driver)*

These examples show that although the e-Bus was not used for regular work commuting, it does have the potential to address specific gaps in education and youth access where transport options are limited. While modest in scale, these benefits indicate the role that flexible community transport can play in reducing access barriers for younger people in remote towns.

6.3 Environmental outcomes: emissions, energy and sustainability

Operating an electric community vehicle in Sandy Point and Venus Bay delivered several environmental benefits, particularly by reducing transport emissions and strengthening the connection between local mobility and renewable energy initiatives. Many survey respondents described the service as “eco-friendly”, “sustainable” or “energy smart”, reflecting the value placed on low-emissions transport in communities that otherwise rely almost entirely on private cars. These outcomes also align with Victoria’s broader climate and clean-transport goals, which encourage the adoption of zero-emissions vehicles and stronger integration between local transport and renewable energy systems.

Reduced transport emissions

Because most substitute trips would have been made using private petrol or diesel vehicles, each shared e-Bus journey avoided multiple car trips and reduced total transport emissions. Survey results show that in Sandy Point, almost 69 per cent of respondents would have travelled by car if the e-Bus were unavailable (38.5 per cent as a driver and 30.3 per cent as a passenger), while approximately 28 per cent would not have travelled at all (Figure 11 a). In Venus Bay, the pattern was similar: a majority of respondents 59 per cent indicated they would have used a private car for the same trip, either as a driver or passenger, with only a small proportion selecting other modes and roughly 29 per cent not travelling (Figure 11 b). This reduction in single-car travel is particularly important in rural areas where even routine trips to Wonthaggi or Leongatha involve long distances and higher per-trip emissions.

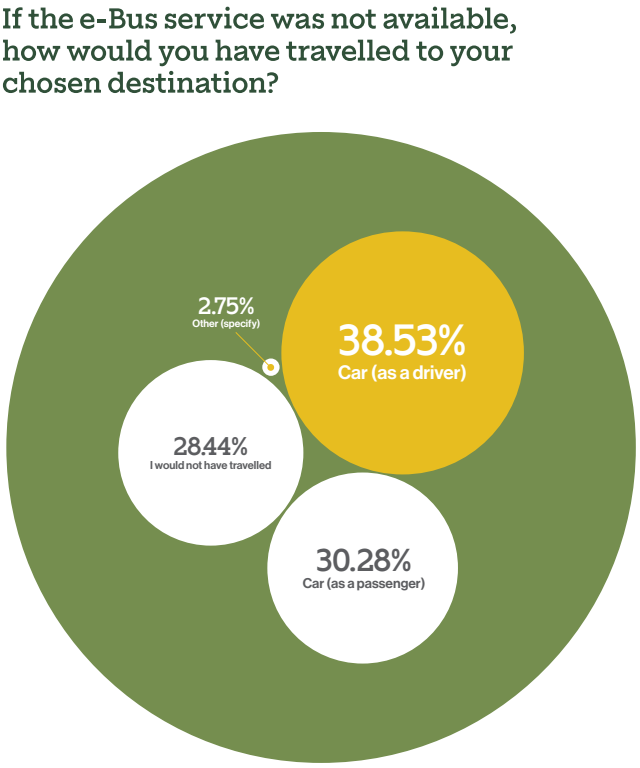


Figure 12 a: Mode of travel if the e-Bus were unavailable, Sandy Point - final community survey 2025

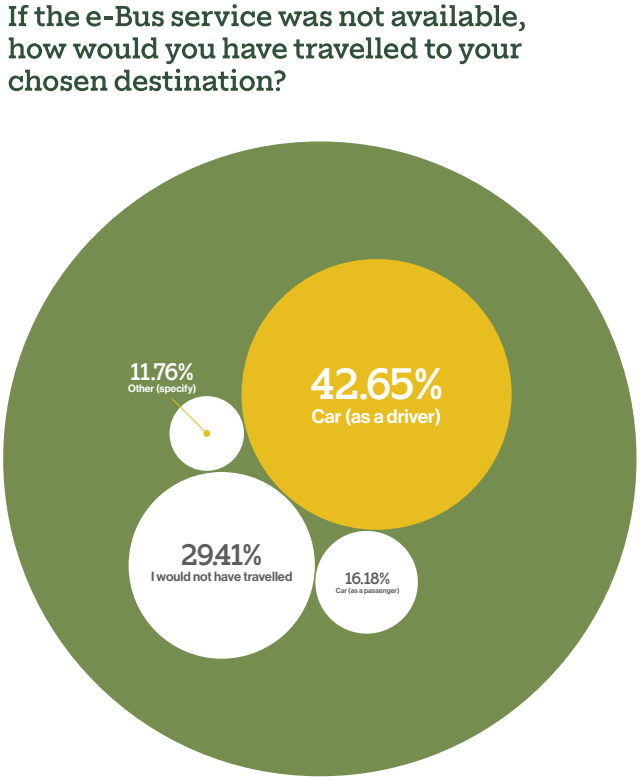


Figure 12 b: Mode of travel if the e-Bus were unavailable, Venus Bay - final community survey 2025

Some respondents explicitly recognised this benefit, noting that group outings by e-Bus “reduced the carbon footprint” compared with several cars travelling separately. Others commented that the project was appealing because it provided “a sustainable way to get around” and reduced reliance on fossil-fuel transport.

Additionally, some respondents noted that using the e-Bus allowed them to “save the car”, reduce fuel consumption and avoid unnecessary emissions from repeated long-distance trips. These modest behavioural changes represent an important shift in communities where sustainable mobility options are otherwise limited.

Alignment with local renewable energy initiatives

The pilot aligned with broader sustainability objectives in both towns. Sandy Point has made significant progress towards community-managed solar and battery infrastructure, and local stakeholders saw the e-Bus as part of a longer-term shift towards cleaner energy and transport systems. Similarly, in Venus Bay the presence of an electric vehicle supported ongoing discussions about energy resilience and sustainability, particularly during periods of high visitor demand.

Survey comments describing the e-Bus as “renewable”, “energy smart” and part of a “future-focussed approach” suggest that residents viewed the service as more than a transport solution. It represented a move towards integrating mobility with emerging community energy systems.

Energy resilience and potential emergency use

Although not formally tested during the pilot, several interviewees raised the idea that an electric community vehicle could support local energy and emergency-response planning. The ability to charge the vehicle from renewable or community-managed systems could help maintain transport access during grid outages or fuel disruptions, which are known risks in coastal and bushfire-prone regions. The pilot helped make this possibility visible, prompting interest in how electric community transport might contribute to local resilience strategies in the future.

6.4 Conclusion: overall impacts of the e-Bus pilot

The Gippsland Community e-Bus Pilot delivered a clear set of social, economic and environmental outcomes, with the strongest impact occurring in the domain of social inclusion. The service addressed long-standing mobility gaps in Sandy Point and Venus Bay, enabling residents to reach essential services, participate in community life and maintain independence in settings where transport barriers are a daily reality. The e-Bus also helped to reduce isolation and provided opportunities for shared activities, that played a role in community wellbeing.

Economic impacts were more modest but still meaningful. The service reduced household travel costs for those with limited transport options, supported local spending linked to shopping trips and group outings, and provided benefits for residents connecting to V/Line services for regional and metropolitan travel. While the pilot did not generate measurable changes in workforce participation, it did help fill specific gaps in educational access and youth mobility, and it demonstrated the operational value of volunteer involvement. In doing so, it highlighted areas where expanded community transport services could support regional economies more broadly.

Environmentally, the electric vehicle model contributed to reduced transport emissions by replacing trips that would otherwise have been undertaken in private petrol/diesel cars. The pilot also aligned with emerging renewable energy and resilience initiatives in both towns, demonstrating how small-scale electric mobility can complement community-led sustainability efforts. Although still exploratory, these outcomes signal the potential role of community transport in supporting the transition to cleaner, more resilient rural transport systems.

Taken together, the findings show that a flexible, community-run electric transport service can strengthen social cohesion, generate local economic value and contribute to environmental goals in rural and coastal settings. The pilot also revealed unmet transport needs across age groups and highlighted opportunities for future service design, integration with regional systems and alignment with broader sustainability strategies.

7 Findings, key learnings and recommendations

This pilot examined whether a flexible, community-run transport service could operate sustainably in two small coastal towns without public transport; what social, economic and environmental outcomes such a service could generate; and what management and operational arrangements best support its delivery. The evidence gathered over two years demonstrates that a community-run model can function effectively in low-density settings, provided it is supported by appropriate resources, simple operational systems and sustained coordination. It also shows that the value of such a service extends well beyond ridership numbers, contributing to social inclusion, community resilience and reduced transport disadvantage. The findings outlined below respond directly to the pilot's research objectives and demonstrate what the model can achieve in practice.

1. Viability and sustainability of community-run mobility in low-density areas

Findings from this pilot show that community-run mobility can operate viably in rural and regional contexts, but viability must be understood in realistic terms. Demand levels in both towns were consistent with patterns observed in the rural and low-density transport sector in Australia and internationally. They reflect the characteristics of rural mobility rather than limitations in the service model. Usage increased steadily as residents became familiar with the service and experienced its convenience, safety and reliability. International evidence also shows that rural passenger transport rarely achieves commercial viability and is instead assessed on its contribution to accessibility, equity and essential service connection rather than on patronage thresholds.

Operational viability in Venus Bay and Sandy Point depended on three factors identified during the pilot:

- A reliable volunteer workforce supported by clear coordination and management.
- Simple booking and scheduling systems suited to small towns.
- An operating model that balances flexibility with regular trips that occur frequently enough (such as weekly shopping runs, group outings, V/Line connections) to anchor the schedule, support volunteers, and manage charging and rostering.

Viability was also shaped by local context. Some communities may be able to operate with light-touch coordination and strong volunteer capacity, while others may require more structured administrative support depending on geography, demographics and the distance to essential services. Regardless of context, capital costs such as vehicle purchase are generally beyond the capacity of small communities. Without external support for vehicle acquisition, communities of this size would be unable to establish a service of this kind, regardless of volunteer capacity.

Recent comparative research from the OECD, which examines how governments address shared mobility challenges, shows that rural transport services are rarely commercially viable and are generally treated as a form of essential social infrastructure. This suggests that sustained operation of community-run services typically requires some degree of public support, even when most trips are delivered by volunteers.

Overall, the pilot demonstrates viability within its purpose: providing access, enhancing social connection and mobility in locations where conventional public transport cannot operate. It also shows that funding and policy design are most effective when they reflect the structural realities of small communities, rather than relying on performance metrics developed for urban transport.

2. Social, economic and environmental benefits

The pilot delivered strong social outcomes across both towns. Residents reported increased independence, reduced isolation, improved access to medical services and greater ability to participate in community life. Many users indicated that they would not have travelled at all without the e-Bus, demonstrating that the service did not simply replace private car travel but enabled mobility that would otherwise be foregone. These outcomes were particularly significant for older adults, residents who no longer felt confident driving long distances, and those without regular access to a vehicle. The service did support a small number of school-related trips, and parents noted that young people in rural areas face significant mobility barriers, suggesting that a community-run service could provide important support for school-aged and younger residents in geographically disadvantaged locations.

Group outings and regular shared trips also contributed to social cohesion. These activities created opportunities for connection, reduced loneliness and strengthened community participation, particularly for residents who lived alone, were new to the area, or had limited social networks. In towns with few local services and limited opportunities for social interaction, these shared trips played an important role in helping residents stay connected to life beyond their immediate community. Volunteers supported this environment, with many passengers describing the service as friendly, dependable and an integral part of community life.

Economic benefits took several forms during the pilot. The service supported local spending through trips to regional centres, enabled group activities that contributed to local business activity and reduced the travel burden on family members who previously provided informal transport. Given that both towns have predominantly ageing populations, transport to employment was not a major area of impact, although the service did support occasional work and education trips. These patterns are consistent with international evidence showing that rural mobility creates value not through fare revenue but by enabling participation, wellbeing and local economic activity.

The use of an electric minibus provided additional environmental and community benefits. The vehicle aligned strongly with local values around renewable energy and sustainability, particularly in towns that experience frequent power disruptions and are working to strengthen climate resilience. Reduced private driving, especially during the busy summer season, contributed to lower emissions and supported safer travel by limiting long trips on rural roads and reducing the risk of drink driving. As Australia's first community-led electric transport pilot of this kind, the project also highlighted several system-level issues relevant to policy development, including gaps in charger compatibility and the need for infrastructure that supports regional EV operations. Despite these challenges, the vehicle operated effectively under regional conditions and demonstrated that electric buses can be integrated into rural, community-run models when supported by appropriate infrastructure and service design.

3. Management and organisational arrangements

The pilot demonstrated that community-run transport can be delivered through different governance structures, each shaped by local capacity, culture, and organisational history. Sandy Point adopted a highly volunteer-led model, with coordination, bookings and day-to-day operations managed by a dedicated committee. This approach reflected the town's strong volunteering culture, smaller population and tradition of self-organised community initiatives. Venus Bay, by contrast,

integrated the service within the existing structures of the Community Centre, where paid staff and volunteers shared responsibilities. This model suited a larger, more socio-economically diverse population and enabled the service to align with the Centre's broader programs and support systems.

Both approaches proved effective within their respective contexts. In Sandy Point, volunteer leadership and local networks provided much of the organisational capacity needed to keep the service running. In Venus Bay, the presence of an established community organisation provided a stable base for coordination and support. The pilot also demonstrated that some degree of structure was important for safe and consistent operation. Induction, safety processes, familiarity with the electric vehicle and handling user enquiries all worked best when there was a clear point of responsibility, even where most tasks were undertaken by volunteers.

The research findings demonstrate that organisational arrangements need to reflect local circumstances, including population size, volunteer availability, existing community infrastructure and distance to essential services. Community-run mobility is highly place-specific, and its sustainability depends on aligning responsibilities, skills and support with the needs and capacity of each community rather than applying a single standard model.

The evidence presented here clarifies how community-led transport can operate in remote regional areas and informs the key learnings and recommendations that follow.

7.1 Key learnings

1. A broader, inclusive definition of community transport is needed

The pilot demonstrated that current interpretations of community transport in Victoria are too narrow, often limited to programs tied to aged care or disability eligibility. This leaves many residents with significant mobility barriers outside formal support, including younger people, seasonal workers and those without reliable access to a car. Experience from other states and international practice shows a shift towards broader, mobility-focused definitions that recognise community transport as part of the transport system rather than a specialist welfare service. Adopting a clearer and more inclusive definition would better guide policy, funding and service planning and reflect the full range of people who rely on these services.

2. Transport disadvantage in low-density rural and coastal areas is structural and persistent

The pilot reinforced that mobility barriers in small regional towns arise from geography, sparse populations and the absence of scheduled public transport rather than from individual circumstances. These conditions, described in earlier chapters and aligned with broader Australian and international research, mean that unmet transport need is ongoing and cannot be addressed through conventional public transport solutions. New models must therefore be designed for environments where distances are significant and private vehicle dependence is high, and where some residents face chronic social isolation without targeted mobility support.

3. Community transport models must be adapted to local capacity

The experience of Venus Bay and Sandy Point showed that communities differ markedly in their volunteer base, organisational readiness and social infrastructure. Some towns can manage substantial coordination responsibilities, while others require structured administrative and regulatory support. A key learning is that community transport cannot rely on a single template. Service design and support structures must be shaped to the capacity, demographics and organisational maturity of each community.

4. Strong partnerships underpin sustainable community-led transport

The pilot highlighted that local energy, leadership and community goodwill are necessary but not sufficient. Effective and safe service delivery depended on clear roles, consistent coordination and support from partner organisations and government. Partnerships helped manage compliance, insurance, risk and training requirements and allowed communities to focus on delivering the aspects of the service that match their strengths. Sustainable community transport requires shared responsibility rather than sole reliance on volunteers.

5. Electric vehicles are feasible in rural community transport when supported by suitable infrastructure

The pilot demonstrated that electric minibuses can operate effectively in regional conditions, particularly where they align with local sustainability goals and resilience planning. However, successful use of electric vehicles in community transport requires not only reliable access to charging, but also charging infrastructure that is compatible with the vehicle type. The pilot highlighted that mismatches between charger types limited where the bus could recharge, reinforcing the need for coordinated planning. Service design must also account for how far the vehicle can travel before needing to recharge. These considerations will be important in future planning to ensure that electric community transport remains practical, resilient and consistent with broader state and national energy and climate objectives.

6. Volunteer-supported models deliver substantial social value but require careful workload management

Volunteers played a central role in the pilot and delivered high levels of service quality, community connection and cost efficiency. At the same time, the administrative, training and coordination responsibilities associated with a transport service can create pressure if too few people carry too much of the workload. Sustainable volunteer involvement requires clear task distribution, simple systems, and ongoing support to prevent burnout and ensure continuity.

7. Demand-responsive services suit low-density environments but require systems that are simple and suited to the level of demand

Flexible, on-demand scheduling worked well in the coastal towns because travel patterns were varied and fixed routes would not have met resident needs. However, manual and semi-manual booking systems produced a high administrative workload, particularly for volunteer coordinators. The pilot showed that digital tools can ease this burden, improve visibility of demand and strengthen planning, but they must be affordable and suited to community capability.

Engagement with on-demand transport operators indicated that although commercial digital platforms offer useful features, their cost structures often exceed what very small communities can sustain. Sector-wide evidence also confirms that while booking systems are increasingly important for long-term coordination, affordability remains a significant barrier.

Phone-based options will remain essential in communities with mixed digital literacy, and digital systems will become increasingly necessary to support coordination, reporting and long-term sustainability.

8. Community transport delivers substantial social inclusion value even at small scale

The pilot reinforced that meaningful impacts can be achieved without high patronage. Improved access to services, increased social participation and stronger community connections were consistently reported across both towns. These outcomes align with research showing that rural mobility programs generate public value through participation and wellbeing rather than fare revenue. Even small, community-led transport initiatives can materially reduce isolation and support ageing in place.

7.2 Recommendations for Government

1. Develop a clear, inclusive definition of community transport

Current interpretations in Victoria tend to frame community transport narrowly around aged care and disability programs. This excludes many residents who face mobility barriers but fall outside formal schemes. A clearer and more inclusive definition, consistent with how community transport operates in Australia and in comparable OECD countries, would provide a coherent basis for policy, funding, service planning and data collection. It would also recognise community transport as part of the broader mobility system rather than a specialist welfare service.

2. Support place-based models and provide tools that match community capacity

The pilot showed that communities differ in their organisational readiness, volunteer availability and social infrastructure. Government should support models that reflect local capacity rather than applying a single structure across regions. This includes providing practical guidance, templates, governance tools and training resources that reduce administrative burden while allowing communities to design services that suit their needs. Support should be flexible enough to assist both highly volunteer-led towns and those that require more formal coordination.

3. Develop sustainable funding approaches that reflect the realities of rural mobility

Rural transport is rarely commercially viable and is recognised internationally as essential social infrastructure. Funding approaches should reflect the higher costs and lower patronage typical of small communities and support core functions such as coordination, training, insurance, reporting and volunteer management. Assistance with capital costs, including accessible and low-emission vehicles, is critical, as these purchases are beyond the financial capacity of most communities.

Sustainable funding approaches should recognise that communities cannot meet capital or coordination costs alone. Targeted support for essential functions, rather than full operational funding, can enable communities to deliver reliable and socially valuable services.

4. Invest in simple and affordable digital tools for booking and scheduling

Manual and semi-manual systems place significant pressure on volunteer coordinators. Digital tools can reduce this workload and provide better visibility of demand, but commercial platforms often exceed the budgets of small communities. Government could improve sector efficiency by enabling access to low-cost or shared systems, providing support with choosing and buying appropriate tools and ensuring that phone-based options remain available for people with low digital literacy. Tools should be easy to use, low maintenance and suitable for regional settings.

5. Simplify accreditation, compliance and reporting requirements

Accreditation and compliance requirements are essential but can be difficult for volunteer-based organisations to manage without appropriate support. Review existing obligations to ensure they reflect the operating realities of small community transport providers. Clear requirements, guided by practical tools, would reduce administrative pressure and improve the long-term capacity of communities to deliver transport services.

6. Strengthen electric vehicle readiness in regional and community transport

The pilot demonstrated that electric minibuses are viable in rural areas when supported by appropriate infrastructure. Future initiatives would benefit from improved charger compatibility, more consistent regional charging coverage and guidance on selecting suitable vehicle types. Support for resilient charging options is important in towns that experience frequent power outages. Targeted incentives to reduce the upfront cost of electric vehicles would also assist communities seeking to transition to low-emission transport.

7. Improve coordination between community transport and regional public transport

Reliable links to V/Line services significantly improved access to essential destinations. Government can support better multimodal travel by strengthening coordination between community transport providers, local government and regional public transport operators. This could include aligning service information, improving communication channels and providing guidance for planning intermodal connections that work in low-density environments.

8. Support further pilots to deepen understanding of rural mobility needs and long-term service models

Future pilots could focus on testing different approaches to community transport in a range of regional and rural settings. This may include exploring:

- Models for improving service sustainability, such as identifying what level or pattern of ridership would make services more stable over time, without expecting rural communities to reach urban-style thresholds.
- The long-term health and social benefits of improving access to medical care, social participation and community connection.
- Alternative service designs, including mixed volunteer and paid workforce models, more structured coordination roles or shared services across towns.
- Different vehicle types, including smaller EVs or hybrid fleets, to match varying trip patterns and passenger needs.
- Innovations in booking and scheduling systems, especially low-cost or shared platforms suited to small communities.

These pilots would provide government with practical evidence to refine policy, understand where different models are most effective, and assess the broader community value created by improved access and social participation.

7.3 Recommendations for Communities and Local Organisations

These recommendations draw on the operational insights generated during the pilot. For detailed practical guidance, templates and resources, see Appendix D: Toolkit.

1. Build a sustainable and distributed volunteer model

Distribute responsibilities across multiple volunteers, ensure adequate back-up roles and establish clear expectations for drivers and coordinators. Realistic workload planning is essential for long-term sustainability.

2. Put in place clear organisational and operational systems

Develop clear procedures for bookings, scheduling, driver management, training, safety, risk assessment and vehicle maintenance. Documented systems support continuity and minimise reliance on individual volunteers.

3. Communicate in ways that match community preferences

Provide multiple communication channels, including phone, email, printed materials and community noticeboards, to reach residents with varying digital access and literacy levels.

4. Select vehicles suited to local conditions and driver capability

Consider road quality, typical trip distances, service/maintenance availability, and passenger/driver comfort when selecting vehicles. EV suitability should be assessed against charging infrastructure and local energy capacity.

5. Apply fair and transparent pricing where appropriate

The pilot showed that even modest contributions can support service sustainability, increase perceived value and help manage demand. Pricing approaches should remain fair and sensitive to local socioeconomic conditions.

6. Explore opportunities to increase vehicle utilisation

In many communities, vehicles are shared across multiple groups or used for charters and community events. Higher utilisation can improve cost efficiency, strengthen community benefit and support the case for future investment.

7. Maintain partnerships with local sustainability and community energy groups

Collaborations with energy and sustainability organisations can provide valuable operational support, increase community engagement and create new opportunities for innovation.

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Appendix A – Project Contributors

The Gippsland Community e-Bus Pilot was made possible through the contribution, support and involvement of many individuals and organisations across government, community and industry. The project team gratefully acknowledges the partners, stakeholders and community members who provided guidance, operational assistance and local knowledge throughout the two-year pilot.

Project Partners

- Department of Transport and Planning (Victoria)
- Venus Bay Community Centre
- Sandy Point Bus Management Committee
- La Trobe University
- iMOVE Cooperative Research Centre

Core Contributors

- Erik van Vulpen (La Trobe University)
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- Henry O'Clery (Venus Bay Community Centre/Gippsland Community Power Hub)
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- Daniel Millton (La Trobe University / Sandy Point Bus Management Committee)
- Monica Lorkin (La Trobe University / Sandy Point Bus Management Committee)
- Nathaniel Wills (Department of Transport and Planning)
- Leah Bellairs (Department of Transport and Planning)
- Jacqueline King (iMOVE)
- Renae Leeson (iMOVE)

Community and Sector Support

The project team also acknowledges the extensive assistance provided by individuals and organisations who supported community engagement, technical guidance, operational problem-solving and sector knowledge, including:

- Department of Transport and Planning (Victoria): Richard Milne
- Sandy Point Community: Neil Shaw, Glenda Scott, Rick Martin, and nine other local volunteers
- Venus Bay Community: Carol Campbell, and 26 other community members
- Safe Transport Victoria: John Mutton, Zelda Lu
- Australian Community Transport Association (ACTA): Murray Coates
- Ventura Bus Company: Andrew Cornwall
- Bass Valley Community Group Inc: Roderick McIvor
- La Trobe University: Sam Wishart, Faez Qureshi, Premsai Mylam
- Skedgo: Tim Doze
- Liftango: Ainsley Hughes, Trystan Eele, Benjamin Kaufman
- Orcoda: Simon Athonisz
- Via: Benjamin Hague
- Transport for New South Wales (formerly Keolis Downer): Sue Wiblin
- Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS): Melanie Trivet
- Transit Care: Terry O'Toole
- NEC: Mark Barmby

Community Contribution

Most importantly, sincere appreciation is extended to the residents of Venus Bay and Sandy Point, whose participation, feedback and volunteer effort were central to the design, delivery and evaluation of the pilot. Their commitment to improving local mobility and resilience shaped every stage of this project.

Appendix B – Research Methods

1 Research Design

The study used a mixed-methods case study design to evaluate the viability, sustainability and community benefits of a volunteer-operated electric bus (e-Bus) service in the communities of Venus Bay and Sandy Point. A co-design approach structured the research, with community members, local leaders and researchers jointly shaping research activities and contributing local insights into transport needs and service design.

To address each of the research objectives, the evaluation incorporated multiple data collection and analysis methods. These included:

- Community consultations: Two community events were held in Venus Bay and Sandy Point at the commencement of the project, supported by local community organisations and engagement officers. These sessions introduced the project, outlined the research approach and enabled early qualitative input from residents and stakeholders.
- Surveys: A series of surveys was distributed to residents, bus users and volunteer drivers using the QuestionPro survey platform, enabling both online completion and supplementary face-to-face data collection.
- Interviews and focus groups: Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and facilitated focus groups with residents, bus users and volunteers to explore lived experiences, transport needs, service impacts and opportunities for improvement.
- Literature reviews: Multiple parallel reviews examined existing national and international evidence on community transport, rural mobility in Australia, models of service delivery, policy and funding settings and case studies of comparable community bus and on-demand trials.
- Engagement with technology providers: Discussions were held with several industry stakeholders and mobility technology companies (including Liftango, SkedGo, Orcoda and Via) to understand current and emerging digital solutions relevant to community transport operations, demand-responsive services and mobility management.
- Supplementary analysis: Additional qualitative and quantitative analysis synthesised insights from primary and secondary evidence, including demographic analysis and contextual data to support interpretation of findings. Operational activity and ridership data were also collected continuously throughout the pilot, providing quantitative insight into service utilisation, patterns of demand and monthly variation in trip activity across both communities.

Data collection occurred across three phases:

1. Planning and design: Co-design workshops, community consultations, initial engagement with technology providers, baseline data gathering and delivery of Survey 1 (Baseline Community Survey).
2. Service trial and optimisation: Launch of the e-Bus service and ongoing monitoring of usage and experiences, including delivery of Survey 2a (Passenger Satisfaction Survey) and Survey 2b (Driver Satisfaction Survey), together with continuous collection of ridership and operational data.
3. Evaluation: Assessment of service performance and community impacts, including delivery of Survey 3 (Final Community Evaluation Survey) and the conduct of semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

The overall design integrated four surveys, four focus groups and up to forty semi-structured interviews, providing triangulated insights into mobility needs, service operations and community outcomes.

2 Data Collection Methods - Surveys

2.1 Survey 1 – Baseline Community Survey

Purpose:

To capture transport behaviour, mobility needs and community expectations prior to the introduction of the e-Bus service.

Administration:

Survey 1 was launched in January 2024 and was delivered predominantly online using the QuestionPro platform, supplemented by face-to-face data collection at community events and workshops. Online distribution occurred through social media, newsletters and community websites. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete. A total of approximately 115 responses were received across both communities.

Content:

- Existing transport modes and patterns
- Barriers to accessing services and activities
- Anticipated use and perceived benefits of the e-Bus
- Preferences for service delivery
- Demographics

The survey included an optional field where respondents could provide their contact details to register interest in volunteering.

2.2 Survey 2a – Passenger Satisfaction Survey

Purpose:

To gather ongoing feedback from passengers throughout the e-Bus trial.

Administration:

Survey 2a was delivered in September 2024. Passengers were identified and invited to participate with the support of community engagement officers during trips and at community events. The survey was hosted on the QuestionPro platform, could be completed on personal devices or tablets provided by engagement officers, and took less than 10 minutes to complete. Seasonal variation in satisfaction and usage was captured across holiday and off-peak periods. Across the trial, approximately 60 responses were received from each community.

Content:

- Trip satisfaction
- Booking and service experience
- Ease of access
- Operational issues or concerns

2.3 Survey 2b – Driver Satisfaction Survey

Purpose:

To document driver experiences and identify operational or safety issues from the perspective of volunteer drivers.

Administration:

Survey 2b was also launched in September 2024 and was completed by volunteer drivers as part of their mandatory post-inspection checklist. The survey was delivered on tablets at community centres using the QuestionPro platform and required approximately one minute to complete.

Content:

- Shift satisfaction
- Any incidents or abnormalities during operation

2.4 Survey 3 – Final Community Evaluation Survey

Purpose:

To evaluate the overall performance and community impact of the e-Bus service at the end of the pilot.

Administration:

Survey 3 was delivered online in September 2025 using the QuestionPro platform. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete. Across both communities, approximately 70 responses were received.

Content:

- Overall satisfaction
- Perceived accessibility and reliability
- Social, economic and environmental impacts
- Experiences of users and non-users
- Recommendations for future service development

3 Qualitative Methods - Interviews

3.1 Focus Groups

7 focus groups were conducted: 3 in Venus Bay and 4 in Sandy Point, with separate groups for volunteer drivers and passengers.

Format:

- 6–10 participants per group
- Held in community centres
- Approximately one hour

Discussion Areas:

User satisfaction and service experience

- Barriers to use and enabling factors
- Volunteer driver perspectives, challenges and motivations
- Opportunities for improvement

Sessions were audio-recorded with participant consent. Transcripts were produced and analysed thematically.

3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Up to 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted, split across the two communities and across the two participant groups (drivers and passengers).

Format:

- Conducted face to face during the field trip in March 2025
- Audio-recorded with participant consent
- Approximately 30–45 minutes in duration

Focus:

- Personal experiences with the e-Bus
- Transport needs and accessibility challenges
- Detailed perspectives on service quality and operational issues
- Perceived social, environmental and economic impacts
- Insights from volunteer drivers regarding service operations, safety considerations and their experiences delivering the service

4 Data Analysis

Interview and focus group transcripts were analysed using NVivo. A thematic analysis approach was applied to identify recurring concepts, patterns and experiences. Themes were mapped against the research questions, including:

- Viability and sustainability of volunteer-operated community transport
- Social, economic and environmental outcomes
- Operational issues and service improvements
- Community mobility needs and transport disadvantage

All transcripts were de-identified before analysis.

The qualitative findings were supported by analysis of ridership and operational activity data collected throughout the pilot, together with demographic data for both communities. These quantitative sources provided contextual understanding of service usage, demand patterns and local population characteristics.

5 Research Limitations

As with all applied research conducted in small regional communities, several methodological limitations should be noted. These limitations do not undermine the findings but provide important context for interpreting the results.

5.1 Sample size and representativeness

Survey and interview participation was voluntary, and response numbers, while strong for small towns, remain modest in absolute terms. This is typical in low-population settings and reflects the available sampling pool. Findings therefore represent the views of engaged community members rather than a statistically representative population sample.

5.2 Seasonal and population variability

Both towns experience significant seasonal population fluctuation. Survey responses, ridership patterns and interview feedback may reflect the time of year in which data was collected. Although Survey 1 and, in part 2a captured holiday and off-peak variation, participation outside these periods was lower.

5.3 Volunteer-led recruitment and operational context

Engagement officers assisted with survey distribution and passenger identification. While this improved reach, it may also have introduced some selection bias because respondents were more likely to be active users or residents connected to local networks. Operational data also reflects the realities of a volunteer-run service, including occasional service gaps due to driver availability or vehicle downtime.

5.4 Evolving service model during the pilot

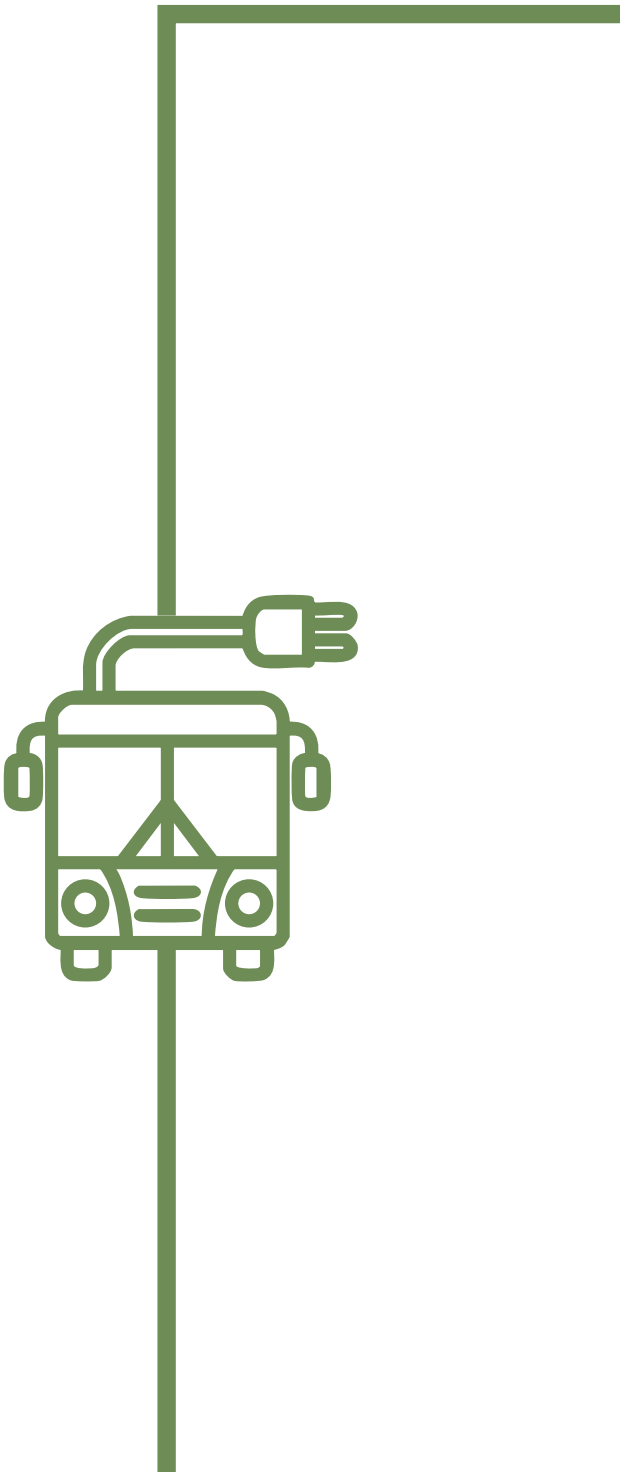
Because the service model was refined throughout the trial period, including booking processes, scheduling approaches and day-to-day operational practices, some participants' experiences relate to earlier versions of the service. As a result, the data reflects a dynamic environment rather than a stable service model.

5.5 Unique pilot context

The pilot combined electric vehicles, community management and a volunteer workforce in an isolated coastal setting. There are limited directly comparable services to contextualise the findings. The results should therefore be interpreted as case-specific, while still offering transferable insights about community transport more broadly and for other small communities considering similar models.

6 Ethical Considerations

The project was conducted in accordance with La Trobe University's human research ethics requirements. Participation in all activities was voluntary, informed consent was obtained using processes appropriate to each method and measures were taken to protect confidentiality and securely manage all data.



Appendix C – Operational activity and ridership data

Table A: Monthly operational activity and ridership data – Sandy Point (2024–2025)

Sandy Point - 2024	Jan-24	Feb-24	Mar-24	Apr-24	May-24	Jun-24	Jul-24	Aug-24	Sep-24	Oct-24	Nov-24	Dec-24
Number of trips	3	9	13	16	11	15	11	4	16	13	11	16
Social/Groups	3	6	7	9	6	9	6	1	4	5	5	5
V/Line		1	4	5	5	3	4	3	9	7	4	10
Shopping/Scheduled		1				3			2		0	0
Maintenance/ Induction		1	2	2			1		1	1	2	1
Number of passengers	25	55	47	59	24	58	34	8	59	46	38	59
Number of new passengers	25	45	36	20	11	40	28	7	17			
Total Volunteer Hours	801	392	73	208	129	128	115	38	106	69	86	75
Revenue	$335.00	$770.00	$700.00	$755.00	$785.00	$1,295.00	$1,203.00	$1,296.00	$420.00	$538.00	$887.00	$1,068.00

Sandy Point - 2025	Jan-25	Feb-25	Mar-25	Apr-25	May-25	Jun-25	Jul-25	Aug-25	Sep-25	Oct-25	Nov-25	Dec-25
Number of trips	11	15	21	30	16	16	17	13	9	17	20	
Social/Groups	10	8	11	10	3	4	9	5	4	9	11	
V/Line	0	6	9	9	9	7	3	5	3	5	6	
Shopping/ emergency/school	0	0	1	8	1	4	1	2	1	1	1	
Wheelchair/bikes/ community				2	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	
Maintenance/ Induction	1	1	0	1	2	0	4	0	1	1	2	
Number of passengers	64	70	99	78	29	37	77	44	60	68	88	
Number of new passengers	-	-	-	1	6	4	48	12	39	16	34	
Total Volunteer Hours	127	80	96	94	77	102	71	83	74.5	91.5	89.5	
Revenue	$1,461.00	$586.00	$2,842.00	$1,900.00	$1,245.00	$619.00	$3, 814.00	$495.00	$1,118.00	$1,171.00	$1,585.00	

Table B: Monthly operational activity and ridership data – Venus Bay (2024–2025)

Venus Bay - 2024	Jan-24	Feb-24	Mar-24	Apr-24	May-24	Jun-24	Jul-24	Aug-24	Sep-24	Oct-24	Nov-24	Dec-24
Number of trips	3	2	3	6	8	4	8	10	9	8	8	15
Social/Groups	1	2		3	4	2	3	2	3	4	1	23
V/Line	2			1	1			2			0	0
Shopping/Scheduled				1	3	2	4	4	6	4	7	12
Maintenance/ Induction				1			1	2			0	0
Number of passengers	28		11	22	33	14	34	17	52	51	36	320
Number of new passengers	28		11	10	16	6	11	1	11	5	11	55
Total Volunteer Hours	8	12	72	92	36.5	20	21.5	31	42	39.5	47	53
Revenue	$0.00	$100.00	$120.00	$180.00	$140.00	$80.00	$35.00	$40.00	$180.00	$150.00	$180.00	$140.00

Venus Bay - 2025	Jan-25	Feb-25	Mar-25	Apr-25	May-25	Jun-25	Jul-25	Aug-25	Sep-25	Oct-25	Nov-25	Dec-25
Number of trips	22	15	13	6	9	5	7	4	10	15	13	
Social/Groups	3	7	6	3	1	0	1	0	1	6	6	
V/Line	3	2	0	0	2	1	1	0	1	3	1	
Shopping/Scheduled	16	6	7	3	6	3	5	4	5	5	6	
Maintenance/ Induction	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	1	0	
Number of passengers	553*	61	119	52	36	12	35	20	22	68	70	
Number of new passengers	53	26	37	11	3	0	13	0	2	35	32	
Total Volunteer Hours	62	65.5	66	32.5	47	17	34	20	43	51	47	
Revenue	$560.00	$490.00	$670.00	$330.00	$260.00	$40.00	$200.00	$0.00	$350.00	$500.00	$400.00	
Revenue	$1,461.00	$586.00	$2,842.00	$1,900.00	$1,245.00	$619.00	$3, 814.00	$495.00	$1,118.00	$1,171.00	$1,585.00	

**This figure includes the passengers transported as part of the free 'Beach Bus' shuttle service which has been in operation for 10+ years over a 2-week period in December 2024 and January 2025.*

Appendix D – Toolkit

Guide for organisations looking to provide Community Transport

VENUS BAY COMMUNITY CENTRE

iMOVE

LA TROBE UNIVERSITY | Centre for Technology Infusion

Sandy Point E-BUS
Powered by community volunteers

Supported by

VICTORIA State Government | Department of Transport and Planning

Guide for organisations looking to provide Community Transport

We have developed this toolkit to guide other communities in understanding the responsibilities and obligations which are required when running a community transport offering. This guide is a result of the experiences the proactive and resilient communities of Sandy Point and Venus Bay found were needed to operate their services. Not everything may be applicable, and this may not contain everything, but the information here is based on their experiences during the project, which took place over 2024-2025, to make it easier for other groups to design their service offering to meet the specific needs of those in their communities.

Related documents

Victorian Transport (Compliance and Miscellaneous) Act 1983

Victorian Road Safety Act 1986

Victorian OHS Act 2004

Victorian Bus Safety Act 2009

Victorian Bus Safety Regulations 2020 (for accredited and exempted services)

List of templates, guides and samples

- Booking Manual sample
- Code of Conduct guide
- Driver Agreement template
- Driver Details template
- Driver Induction Training and Evaluation template
- Driver Log template
- Driver Manual template
- Emergency Management Plan template
- FAQs template
- Incident Report template
- Privacy Policy guide
- Process for prospective volunteers template
- Spreadsheets sample
- Vehicle Maintenance Log template

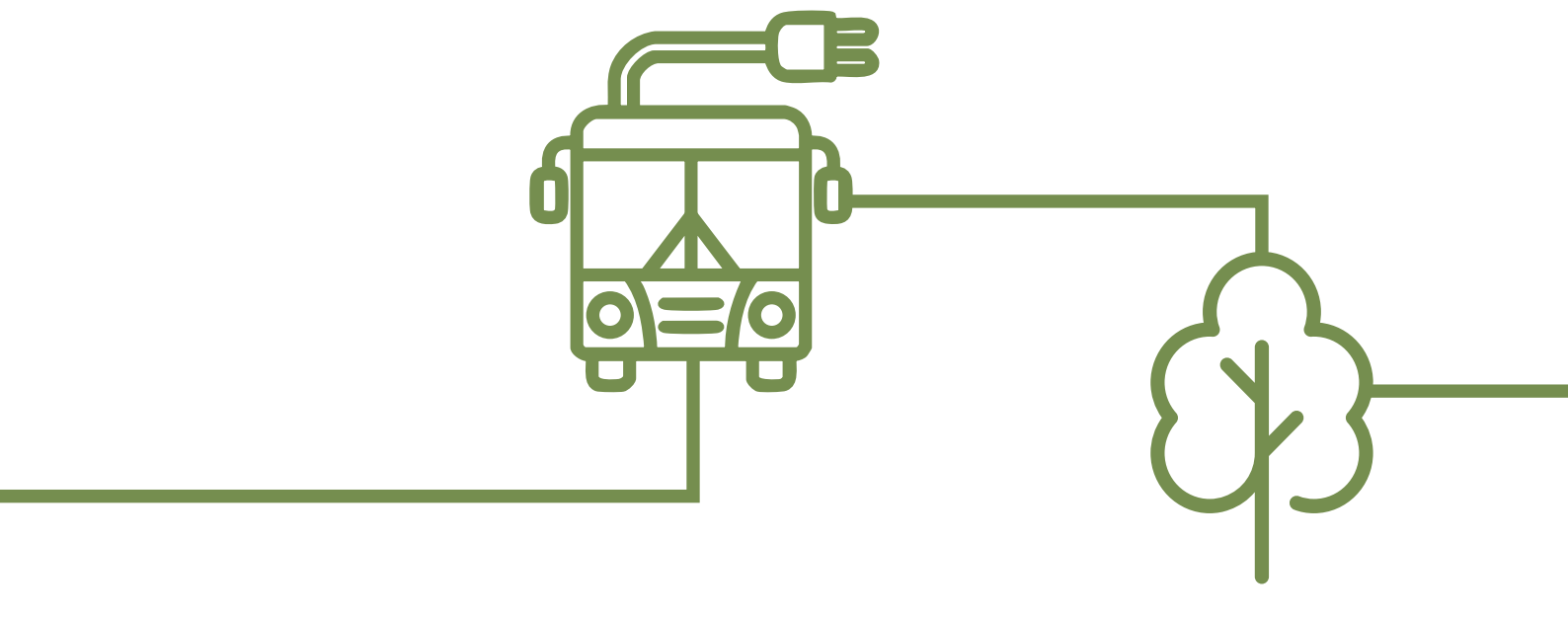
Structure of organisation

If an existing entity decides to include the provision of Community Transport, the organisational structure will already be in place. However, if a new group is formed, thought around how to set up the right structure might be needed. The following websites might be good places to start, especially where an entirely new organisation is being formed.

Community Door based in Queensland has clear, easy to read information which might assist initial discussions amongst community members.

Victoria's consumer regulator, Consumer Affairs Victoria is the entity responsible for incorporated bodies.

The Victorian Managed Insurance Authority (VMIA) may be another useful resource to explore.



Administrative documents

The list below (alphabetical order) contains suggestions for documents which might be required or useful for your organisation to create.

Booking Manual – whatever booking system is in place needs to be well understood and consistently used by all volunteers involved with bookings. It would also be useful for other members of the organisation to at least be aware of, should there be a need for someone to take over in an emergency.

Code of Conduct/Breach of Code – it may be that a breach of code is not needed

Driver Manual – to assist volunteers who may only drive irregularly and lose familiarity with the vehicle, processes, requirements. A copy should be easily accessible in the vehicle and volunteer drivers might also wish to have their own copy to refer to as needed.

Emergency Management Plan – to guide everyone including committee members, paid staff (if any) and volunteers, if an emergency occurs. Hopefully it is never needed, but it is very important to have a plan just in case.

FAQs – setting these up at the beginning will really help manage expectations and guide everyone on what they are doing and why.

Privacy Policy – the organisation needs to consider what data they want and need to collect as well as understand how the data will be used.

Process for prospective volunteers – for potential volunteer drivers.

Administrative records

The list below (alphabetical order) contains suggestions on what records might be required by your organisation.

Database – record the contact details of volunteers, committee members, passengers, sponsors, supporters in an excel spreadsheet to facilitate filtering so that different contacts can receive the information most relevant to them. Ensure the information you collect and record, is aligned with your privacy policy. An example below:

Role	Email	Phone	If a passenger, note journey type	Notes
Volunteer driver			V/Line	
Volunteer			Shopping	
Committee member			Emergency	
Passenger			Wheelchair	
Sponsor			Private group - social	
Supporter			Maintenance/Induction	
Other			Community Group - social	
			Personal appointment	
			Community - service	

Driver Agreement – details the expected responsibilities and obligations of the organisation. As per the Process for prospective volunteers, the driver should be given the Driver Agreement along with the Code of Conduct and Privacy Policy prior to their induction so they can be familiar with the contents.

Driver Details form – to meet driver licensing requirements: The organisation will seek drivers who hold a valid Australian/State or Territory driver's license, a valid Working with Children Check (WWCC), and a national Police Check with details recorded in the Driver Details form. The organisation will need to decide who will be responsible for the costs of checks and communicate this to prospective volunteers.

Driver Induction, Training and Evaluation form – a record which covers knowledge of the driver responsibilities, overall vehicle knowledge, how to operate the vehicle, and understanding of the driver administrative processes specific to the needs of the service. The organisation should arrange for the driver to be trained and properly inducted into the role and evaluated as to their ability to be approved to drive. In some cases, a potential driver may withdraw as they are not comfortable signing the Driver Agreement.

Once the Driver Agreement form has been signed, the driver is approved to drive the vehicle for the organisation, noting it is the responsibility of the driver to notify of any changes to their license details which may arise from change of address, change of name, license renewal, loss of demerit points, suspension of license, or any medical conditions which may affect their ability to drive safely – refer to Medical conditions - Transport Victoria.

Driver Log – form completed by driver at the completion of their drive. The form may be paper based for ease of use, but someone will need to enter all the information into a spreadsheet in case details about a particular drive is required later. A digital version could be created for entry of details, but will require a good internet connection, a telephone or tablet, and drivers with the confidence and skills to use technology.

Incident Report – form to assist with notifications to Safe Transport Victoria (STV) when necessary.

Other document records

- **Organisation certificate of currency –** copy of current insurance information readily available.
- **Registration / Accreditation –** check what is required in your state to operate your service and record the relevant details so readily available.
- **Roadside Assist membership –** copy of any roadside assistance membership readily available.
- **Vehicle Insurance certificate –** copy of current insurance information readily available.
- **Vehicle Maintenance Log –** needed to record details of all maintenance that is carried out. This should include weekly checks by the organisation and record details of regular services carried out by a qualified mechanic appropriate to the vehicle.
- **Vehicle Manual/Warranty –** documentation

Accreditation

Within Australia, each community organisation providing transport is generally configured to respond to the unique needs of the community which will use it. This means it can be hard to understand the relevant Acts and legislations which apply and need to be complied with.

No matter what vehicle is used to provide community transport, there is a strong likelihood that it will need some form of accreditation. In Victoria, the only way to get a definitive answer regarding a particular scenario or situation is to contact Safe Transport Victoria and seek their advice as there are many elements in the associated Acts to be considered.

In Victoria, a vehicle with 10 seats including a driver is considered a bus. A vehicle with less than 10 seats (including the driver) may be classed as a Commercial Passenger Vehicle (CPV) and may be subject to a different set of rules.

There are two parts to the accreditation process and typically, both the **operator** and the **drivers** need to be accredited:

1. **Part A** – the **vehicle** type determines the legislation it sits under – BUS or CPV?
2. **Part B** – the **service** type determines if accreditation is needed

It should be noted that if an organisation is exempt from accreditation, they will be unable to undertake transport requests for sporting clubs, aged care homes, or schools which may limit the ability to expand the service and provide transport for more people facing transport disadvantage.

Booking process

A guide to managing the booking process

The community group needs to think about how bookings might be made for their service offering.

How to receive requests for bookings:

1. Phone call (recommend a dedicated phone and number for 'booking officer' to use)
2. Text message (as per phone comments)
3. Email (recommend a dedicated group inbox/email address)
4. Using an online booking tool (there are many options out there, but they may cost money to install/use)

All the different ways to submit a request for booking can incur issues.

With phone bookings, text messages, and emails we would advise on setting days of the week and times when passengers can expect their call to be answered and actioned to manage expectations. Otherwise, being a booking officer can take over one's life with the expectation to be on-call 24/7 which is not sustainable. It may also be wise to only accept bookings in advance and communicate this to the community.

At times, last minute requests for assistance are received and you may wish to help but be aware that this can change passenger expectations that they do not need to book in advance.

There is a real need for an off the shelf booking tool which removes a lot of the work from the back end, but for now, nothing exists in the marketplace that is affordable. Any booking tool needs to be easy to set up and can offer options to passengers to meet their booking requirements which may include non-standard requests such as:

- transport of wedding guests or wedding party
- groups of locals attending local events
- being made aware of local events and hopping on the vehicle with others to participate in these events
- V/Line connection or other more bespoke booking request
- Scheduled regular trips to regional centres for shopping and other appointments

Ideally the booking tool is not complex for people making or taking bookings and can also integrate a costing tool and calculate the need for any refuelling requirements.

Making use of event booking platforms like Humanitix can be a solution but can involve a lot of work to set up.

Using website platforms with booking platforms built in could help ease the load but will require some expertise to set up and test to see if it works. This approach worked well for Sandy Point who found the Wix® Website Builder to be an affordable, highly functional platform. The bookings module within Wix® offers:

- an "appointments" style booking system that could be used for an on-demand service
- a bookings management calendar accessible by multiple booking officers
- a staff allocation process for assigning a driver to a job
- a customisable online booking form
- a data capture to spreadsheet option to record bookings data - including for off-line bookings
- automated and customisable communications with passengers - reducing the workload for booking officers, at least for straightforward bookings, and ensuring that passengers received consistent notifications. Includes email and sms notifications - booking confirmations, trip reminders, feedback requests etc
- a management app that is an optional alternative to the desktop dashboard, which some people find easier to use on the run.

- automatically creates a database of passengers with contact details
- includes drivers contact list
- enables bulk emails to contacts

Be aware that some passengers may struggle with using technology to book – the human touch remains very necessary and could help reduce errors in the booking process because they have misunderstood questions or miss populating a field, causing the request to fail to submit (and frustrate the passenger). Advice received early in the project continues to apply and needs to be remembered - "You have to meet people where they are at, not where you want them to be."

Whatever method is used, it must communicate information clearly to manage expectations and trigger the next stage of the process – seek a driver for the job so the request can be confirmed for the passenger.

How to confirm request for booking:

1. Check request is within the limits of travel as set by the organisation
2. If YES, check vehicle is available
3. If YES, seek a suitable driver
4. When a driver accepts the request confirm the booking with the passenger and 'block out' vehicle from further bookings to reduce double or conflicting booking.

Booking requests come in all shapes and sizes including requests for travel to Melbourne (central and suburbs) or airport. The organisation needs to be clear about what it will and will not provide transport for.

The group will need to determine how booking requests are shared with volunteer driver pool to find someone willing to do the job. Using a communications platform like 'WhatsApp' or 'Messenger' might be useful here with a specific group created for volunteer drivers. This group will need continual management to add and remove volunteers who might be away or unavailable for long time periods. This will signal any changed circumstances are understood and supported and will help reduce burnout in volunteers.

Any online booking platform might need to consider how processes integrate, or can be integrated, to reduce the workload on the person taking the booking request.

Recommended that passengers store the phone number for the transport service in their contacts so if they are contacted for some reason (to advise of an issue or to confirm a booking), it will identify who is calling them and they will be more likely to answer the call.

How to record booking requests:

5. Spreadsheets – may have tabs for active volunteer drivers (their information including availability), bookings (suggest centrally accessed so if one person cannot take bookings for a while, someone else can take on the role with greater ease)
6. Dashboard of any online booking tool used

There is a need to record requests for bookings somehow, to reduce mix ups and double bookings.

The record keeping can also help with documenting how much use the service is getting and may form the basis of a database that can assist with customer relationship management.

Other complexities that might need consideration:

- Range anxiety
- Passenger fares/donations
- How will payments be accepted?
- Who might travel for free?

Depending on the type of vehicle, for example if an EV, the volunteers taking the bookings may not be confident in knowing whether the distances to be travelled will require top up or recharging of the vehicle and how that might impact back-to-back bookings.

Battery consumption is affected by many variables including driving style, passenger load, use of heating and cooling, terrain. Relying on Google maps to calculate distance and range may not be accurate which may lead to a miscalculation causing significant anxiety for booking person and driver.

Occasionally, some bookings can be extraordinarily complex, taking more time to finalise with passengers and drivers, than the actual duration of the booking.

Depending on the type of funding that is supporting the provision of transport to the community, there may be a need for the Community Group to indicate their expectations from passengers for their travel to significantly reduce the stress for volunteers to have to negotiate appropriate payment amounts.

Understanding who may use services at no charge is also something which may need consideration.

What is needed by passengers and those taking booking requests?

Passengers need a reliable, friendly, inexpensive and effective service, catering for a wide variety of travelling requests, from simple local trips, flexible trips from point A to point B, where the location of pickup location and destination constantly changes. This is, in effect, a demand-responsive service.

The **community group** taking the bookings needs a clear understanding of who they will transport, why, and what limitations to their service may apply.

The **community group** also needs to consider the expectations of drivers to help passengers with luggage, shopping bags, other items and communicate clearly to manage expectations.

The **community group** requires volunteers to manage the bookings (and we would recommend at least two people to share the load).

The **community group** requires volunteer drivers to drive passengers to their destinations. We would recommend a team of at least 3-5 drivers who have different interests and availability to better align with passenger requirements.

Finally, the **volunteer drivers** and **booking people** need a community group that has good leadership and support structures in place to support the volunteers to carry out their roles as easily as possible and prevent burnout. The organisation should be aware that it takes time to plan and develop anything new and passengers will take time to develop trust in what is offered before they change established behaviours to make more use of the service.

A sample booking manual using Wix® has been provided in this toolkit.

Communications

Communications is a very broad description for the bulk of the work taking place in the provision of community transport. It is possibly the most important piece of the operations to ensure success, yet often it is done without thinking or planning, it just evolves according to those involved. However, being made aware of some of the different communication elements might assist groups to identify the people, skills and resources needed and match according to the strengths and interests of potential volunteers.

People

People are the key contributor to the operation of the service and its success. Without people, nothing would happen. Communities consist of many different people with different skills and experiences which should provide a broad base of talents which can be utilised. Obviously, people who enjoy interacting and helping others are the kinds of people you want to be a volunteer driver or who might be the first to connect with the public. Someone who is unable to drive can still be involved be it in the administration/back end of the operation or be responsible for the maintenance of the vehicle. Having more than one person for each task/area will help prevent burnout, where a volunteer feels overworked and undervalued/unsupported and quits volunteering altogether. It is important to have efficient processes that stream new volunteers through registration, training and then on to actually volunteering reasonably promptly to avoid them losing their motivation to volunteer. Some thought should be given to early volunteering jobs to ensure they are within the skills, experience, and capability of each volunteer so it is an enjoyable experience for them. For example, do not put a volunteer on a complex job that has high passenger numbers, multiple pick-up locations and is at night.

It is suggested that a variety of different people are recruited to take on the different roles needed. A clear description of what the role requires is helpful for potential volunteers to understand what the responsibilities and expectations of them might be. Providing information about any support/guidance available to volunteers will also assist in recruiting the right people that are willing to commit for a longer time.

The roles that need filling are:

Leader/coordinator – to lead the group, build relationships with many volunteers, keep everyone together and on track, ensuring the necessary bureaucratic tasks are taking place, regular meetings occur, and identifying problems early before they become serious issues. They also help keep everyone motivated and identify where a volunteer may be getting overworked. The leader also needs to consider succession planning for the organisation's longevity as volunteers will come and go as their lives and circumstances change.

Booking person/s – although this role can be done remotely as has been evidenced by the Sandy Point team, whoever takes on the role MUST have a very good understanding of the community and geography to understand the requests that are received and ensure the bookings are made with routes and pick-ups planned efficiently and avoiding potential clashes. They need familiarity with local roads, conditions, and if the vehicle is an EV, they need knowledge of the charging stations that exist. It is advised that there are at least 1-2 people who can back up the main booking person as passengers expect swift responses which requires that the phone is monitored often throughout the day.

Communications person/s – to create and maintain the digital assets (website, social media accounts, e-newsletters). The same person or another person may develop physical collateral (flyers, fridge magnets).

Drivers – it is very important to match drivers to jobs and groups of people. It is suggested that a core group of drivers needs to be no less than 4-5, with a minimum of 2 who are largely available most of the time.

Duty Manager/s – the role of a duty manager is a little different to that of the booking person and this person needs to be someone who can monitor the phone, paying close attention on days/times when services are running. In both Sandy Point and Venus Bay, the same person took on both roles which added considerable stress to their load as a volunteer. Looking at the phone once a day would result in a reasonably poor service offering that did not meet the unexpected needs of a passenger. The Duty Manager also needs to be on standby throughout a drive in case the driver encounters a problem and needs assistance.

The example below provides a sense of a typical 24 hours (without an emergency occurring) in the life of a duty manager/booking person:

1	Message from driver on Sunday, who took the fire extinguisher to the CFA for testing on Saturday, to say bus was unlocked and key fob not working so he locked all doors manually.
2	Sunday evening - issue email to driver and text passengers with approximate pick-up times for Monday morning service.
3	Sunday evening - receive message from a passenger asking for number of the driver.
4	Sunday evening - respond to passenger to advise we do not issue drivers number, but to contact Duty Manager if needed.
5	Sunday evening - went to check the doors and test on the bus to ensure all working as needed for the new driver undertaking their first drive. They were working fine.
6	Monday morning - 8.28am duty manager receives message from passenger that they want to put luggage on bus when they arrive on V/Line so they can do their shopping.
7	Duty manager contacts driver to advise and explain what to do to facilitate this request.
8	Subsequent message received from passenger that they missed the early V/Line and now need to rearrange time to meet driver to put bags on the bus.
9	Duty manager informs driver of this change at 9.40am
10	Duty manager communicates with passenger that driver is aware of the change in time for pickup.
11	Passenger contacts Duty Manager again to advise they caught the wrong bus and are cancelling their trip.
12	Duty Manager advises driver that the pickup is no longer required.

Grant writer – someone who could seek out grant funding or sponsorship opportunities and develop applications.

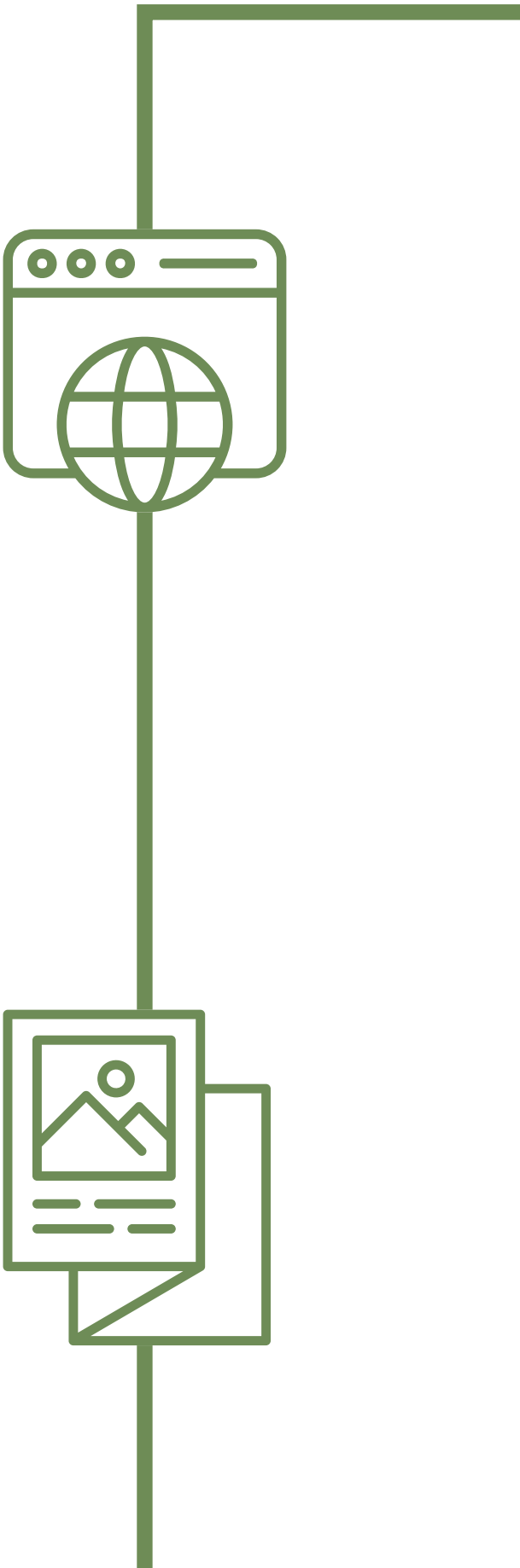
Maintenance person/s – to support the maintenance of the vehicle and keep clean.

Treasurer/finance person – to manage all the finances associated with the organisation and operations. They will need to consider setting up bank accounts, how fuel will be purchased by drivers when needed, how to pay for all the costs (insurance, registration, maintenance) that will be incurred, how donations will be received, how any refunds required are made, and undertake reporting as per any legal requirements determined by the set up of the organisation.

Digital assets (how people will make contact?)

It is strongly suggested that standalone digital assets are created to operate the community transport service.

- Telephone number for people to contact the organisation.
- Email address
- Website with suggested pages/headings/content
    - Home
    - About us
    - FAQs
    - Bookings/information/payment/donations (if applicable)
    - Events
    - News/media
    - Testimonials
    - Contact us
    - Subscribe to mailing list (footer)
    - Detail sponsors (footer)
    - Contact links – phone/email/social media
    - Privacy policy
- Social media accounts
- Digital signage
- E-newsletters
- How organisational files are securely stored and shared for others to access (Dropbox/Google Drive/other?)



Physical collateral

- Flyers
- Fridge magnets

Physical assets

- 1-2 smartphones / tablets preloaded with apps and relevant information will be required by the driver and the booking people/ duty manager.

Vehicle

Vehicle requirements

Where is vehicle to be stored?

How will drivers access vehicle?

How will refuelling of vehicle occur? How will payment be made?

What needs to be provided in the vehicle?

- Driver Folder to contain the following documents:
  - Driver / Vehicle manual (include instructions for fuelling / charging as relevant)
  - Key contacts (also uploaded on phone)
  - Emergency Management Plan:
    - Information on what to do if the vehicle breaks down or is involved in an accident/incident
    - Reporting an incident as per the Safe Transport Victoria requirements
    - Contact details of appropriate [Name of Community Group] for emergencies
    - Contact details for emergency services
    - Information about registration, insurance, roadside assist membership, tolls
  - Blank driver log sheets to record details of each drive undertaken by a driver
  - A place to store completed driver logs for later collection and record keeping
  - Blank incident report forms
  - Code of Conduct/Breach of Code
  - FAQs (might be helpful)
- Phone loaded with relevant navigation, music, fuel apps and other information
- Facilities to accept cash/online donations (optional)
- First Aid Kit
- Hand sanitiser
- No smoking/eating signs
- Bottles of water
- Umbrellas
- Torches (to help on night trips so passengers can safely see their way on and off the bus
- Clean up kit/including a bucket or motion sickness bags
- Rubbish bin/bag

Vehicle servicing and maintenance:

Task	Frequency	Who is responsible
Vehicle safety checks to comply with regulatory body	Annual	[name of approved service provider] To be booked by [role]
Regular servicing	As per manufacturer's warranty/guidelines	[name of approved service provider] To be booked by [role]
Vehicle check	Weekly	[Volunteer]
Vehicle check	Pre- and post-drive	Volunteer driver
Cleaning	To be decided	[Volunteer]

Guide to selecting a vehicle for community transport

WHO will you be transporting?	If elderly, then consider easy access and egress from the vehicle. Is there an automatic door? Is there enough space for each passenger to feel comfortable? If wheelchair transport will be provided: • Is it easy to operate for drivers? • Test drive/ride to ensure comfort for passenger in a wheelchair and ensure other passengers are comfortable. • Check the noise of empty wheelchair lift is not significant. • Cost to install can be high and might be a factor to consider.
HOW MANY will you be transporting?	Look at different vehicle types available in the market and consider number of seats and seating configuration for a guide as to the best vehicle to fit your purpose and demand. Perhaps two smaller cars might work rather than a minibus?
WHAT will passengers be likely to bring on the vehicle?	How will luggage, possessions, shopping be stored safely during travel in the vehicle?
WHERE are you likely to be travelling? *(urban or rural roads, night driving, extreme temperatures, wildlife)*	Ensure the vehicle is suited to driving on the roads, and in the conditions, you are likely to drive in. Request a test drive in your area. Any vehicle being considered should be test driven by users in an environment and in a manner similar to the one that the vehicle will be used in. Consider if additional lights for night driving will be required.
Petrol/Diesel/EV?	Where are you able to fill up with petrol or diesel? If EV, is it AC or DC charge and what is likely to be compatible with most public charging stations in your area?
QUALITY of the vehicle	Check the quality of everything and understand the warranty period, servicing required, and location of service centre/mechanics, ideally locally. Will a loan vehicle be provided when your vehicle is out of action/being serviced? Check online reviews for vehicle manufacturers under consideration. Check online reviews for the seller as well as after sales service provision. Are they reputable and does the seller honour repairs needed under warranty? Are they capable and will they undertake the scheduled servicing? Seek feedback or recommendations from trusted local mechanics. Contact other organisations to see what vehicle/s they are using and how satisfied they are or what issues they may have experienced.

COST to run the vehicle	Understand the ongoing costs associated with the vehicle including: • Fuel/energy costs • Service costs • Spare parts cost (may be influenced by the brand) Check availability of spare parts.
EASE for many to drive	What sort of license is required to drive the vehicle? Is it easy for lots of people to drive? Is it comfortable for different people to drive?

[Name of Community Group] and logo if any

A guide for taking bookings using Wix® and WhatsApp

Disclaimer: *This guide was developed for use in one community with a few people sharing the role of booking person. This guide is only provided as* ***an example*** *of the information to include in any booking manual for other community groups. Each organisation needs to decide which communication platforms / websites best suit their needs and budgets.*

Communications

You will need to have access to the following:

- WhatsApp (2 groups)
  - Active drivers
  - [Name of Community Group] Duty Manager
- Wix® Bookings
  - Desktop dashboard
  - Wix ®Owner App for smartphone (optional)
  - Login name - email: ***@***.com
- email
  - ***@***.com
  - Tip: add this email account to your personal email client (Gmail or other)

Set up your device notifications for these as you wish.

Daily / Shift tasks

- At start of shift - catch up on any PENDING bookings
  - Check any internal notes on the workflow progress
  - Continue the workflow for each booking if possible. See workflow described below.
- During the shift - process new bookings when convenient
- At end of shift - leave handover notes
  - Enter a brief internal note into any booking progressed during your shift. Include date and your initials. Examples ...
    - 25/4 driver requested JS (John Smith)
    - 2/5 donation agreed $180 JD (Jane Doe)
    - 13/7 waiting for passenger response JD

Workflow

1. You are notified that a new booking request has arrived
2. Check bus availability
3. Find aw volunteer driver
4. Process the booking
5. Forward the trip details to the relevant driver

[Name of Community Group] and logo if any

‘How to’ notes for Workflow

1. How to see new booking requests

Get notifications

Passengers are encouraged to use the online booking form on the Wix® website – www.[nameofcommunitygroup].com/bookings

- Wix® will send a notification email to the bus bookings email account - ***@***.com
- Allow your device to receive notifications from the ***@***.com account
- The Wix® phone app (if installed) will also send notifications to your phone.

Check the details of the new booking in the email inbox - ***@***.com

- The Inbox will also have any emails sent directly to the email address by potential passengers.
- It will also have email notifications from messages sent via the website ‘Contact Us’ form - these may or may not be about potential bus bookings.
- Click on and use Inbox labels - will help to understand and monitor incoming bookings

  Notes:

  Do not rely on the Read / Unread status to see new emails, as others may have opened the email but not processed the booking. Look for recent emails that have arrived overnight or during your shift.

Bookings by phone or direct to the bus email …

- Phone bookings, or direct email bookings, will need to be entered into the online booking form on the website by the Booking Person - as if they are the passenger. www.[nameofcommunitygroup].com/bookings
- This will get them onto our system and enable automated confirmation emails to passengers.

2. How to check bus availability

Go to Wix® Dashboard (or Phone App)

- Go to Booking Calendar > Calendar > relevant date
- Is the bus free?
- Is there sufficient lead time for recharging the bus?

3. How to find a volunteer driver

Go to WhatsApp group: ‘Active drivers’

- Enter a request for a driver. Give the date, time, destination.
- Reply to successful driver response - just with thanks at this stage, details will be sent to the driver later.

[Name of Community Group] and logo if any

4. How to Process the Booking

The following process must be followed in this order in order to successfully trigger the confirmation email for the passenger.

Go to Wix® Dashboard

- Go to Booking Calendar > Calendar > relevant date
  The relevant booking will be white at this stage as its status is 'PENDING'
  NB: Click on the booking, but DO NOT click on the 'Approve' button.
  The blue link "View Form Submission" will show you the details from the submitted booking form.

- Edit the booking in this order
  NB: Do not click 'Save' until all of the following are done ...
  1. click on the top pencil icon
  2. adjust the "Arrival Time" to match the "Pick-up time" requested in the booking form (if different)
  3. Tick the boxes to update the passenger by email and by SMS
  4. click on the middle pencil icon
  5. adjust the Duration (may be quicker or longer than the default 2 hours)
  6. enter the designated driver from the dropdown staff list. (ignore the message "doesn't provide this service")
  7. add any admin internal note-to-self if useful
  8. **click 'Update'**
  9. **Be sure you have ticked the box to 'Notify client via email'**
  10. **Optional: if needed, add a personal message for this booking**
  11. **click 'Save'**

Notes:

This will then automatically send an email to the passenger to let them know that the booking is confirmed and the name of their driver.

The booking on our Wix® calendar will now show as a colour according to who is the driver.

5. How to forward the trip details to the relevant driver

Go to the email - ***@***.com

- Open the relevant email that was received with the subject "Booking confirmed". It will be found under the email label "Booking confirmations".
  Tip: find it quickly by typing the passenger's name into the email search box.
- Forward this email to the relevant driver.

[Name of Community Group] and logo if any

Notifications Schedule

- The bus booking system will generate automatic emails to passengers throughout the process that inform them of their booking status.
- Many do not require any action by the Booking Person. Some will be generated when the Booking Manager ticks the 'Notify..' box (with option to add a brief note to the passenger).
- NB: Booking Manager may make internal changes to the booking without triggering an email provided they DO NOT tick 'Notify..'

PURPOSE OF NOTIFICATION	RECIPIENT	WHEN (trigger)	NOTES - ADMIN ACTION
Booking request received	To passenger - and copy to ***@***.com	Passenger submits the booking on website	No admin action needed
Booking confirmed	To passenger - and copy to ***@***.com	Booking Officer edits booking - updates time and duration, names a driver, **and** ticks the notify boxes. Save.	Admin edits booking **and** ticks 'Notify client via email' **and** also ticks 'Notify client via SMS' Additional personal message may be added, but is optional, not always necessary.
Job confirmed, trip details sent to driver	To driver	Booking Officer emails the relevant driver	Forward the **confirmation email** that was sent to ***@***.com
Travel reminder & donation request - email	To passenger	Day before travel	No admin action needed
Travel reminder - SMS	To passenger	Day before travel	No admin action needed
Booking declined	To passenger	Booking "declined" by admin	Admin should enter a personal message for client … **and** Admin must tick 'Notify …'
Booking rescheduled	To passenger	Booking edited by admin - day or time altered	Admin should enter a personal message for client … **and** Admin must tick 'Notify …'
Booking canceled - cancel request has been received	To passenger	Booking deleted / cancelled by admin	Admin must tick 'Send cancellation email' … **and** Admin should enter a personal message for client
Feedback request	To passenger	Day after travel	No admin action needed

Code of Conduct

What is a Code of Conduct?

A Code of Conduct sets out the standards of behaviour expected of staff, contractors and third parties, including volunteers. It is a list of behaviours that guide people on how to perform their duties in a professional or ethical way. A Code of Conduct forms part of your organisation's broader suite of policies.

Why do I need a Code of Conduct?

Codes of Conduct are not a legal requirement, but they are a good tool for setting expectations of behaviour. Having a Code of Conduct provides an overarching, high-level approach for what your organisation expects of its staff, service users, clients, contractors and third parties, including volunteers. A Code of Conduct is a useful risk management tool and assists your organisation to comply with its work, health and safety obligations. A Code of Conduct is also a useful tool for promoting inclusion in your organisation.

What do I need to think about when creating a Code of Conduct?

As a Code of Conduct is a set of high-level principles about expectations of behaviour, it is useful to consult with other staff about what it should include. Volunteering Australia recommends the following considerations when writing a Code of Conduct:

- Consult with those who are bound by the Code of Conduct ensuring all staff, both paid and unpaid, can contribute ideas and share their opinions.
- Focus on inclusion by making sure the Code of Conduct reflects not just cultural and linguistic diversity, but diversity of ethics and values.
- Ensure your Code of Conduct is accessible by using inclusive language and plain English.
- Get support from all levels of the organisation. Setting and monitoring organisational culture is the responsibility of an organisation's Board of Governance, and operationalisation of this culture is through the CEO and the staff. Consult with persons at every level of your organisation to ensure your Code of Conduct is fit-for-purpose, reflects organisational values, and is owned by everyone it affects.

What should a Code of Conduct include?

A Code of Conduct may include the following:

- Ethical principles underlying your organisation's expectations of behaviour.
- Your organisation's values and how these can be demonstrated in the workplace and when persons are representing your organisation externally.
- Scope, including recognition that everyone is accountable for upholding the Code of Conduct.
- References to any compliance requirements in accordance with applicable legislation or standards.

When does the Code of Conduct apply?

Your Code of Conduct applies to all staff, both paid and unpaid. whenever they are working for or representing your organisation.

Sample Code of Conduct

The below sample Code of Conduct includes items your organisation may wish to think about when creating or reviewing its own Code of Conduct.

Introduction/Policy Statement

Organisation name expects all staff to act lawfully, honestly, ethically and with integrity at all times and in every aspect of their involvement with *organisation name*. Staff are accountable for their own actions in accordance with *insert any relevant legislation* and all other applicable laws and standards.

Scope

All employees, volunteers, Board Members, students, interns, contractors, consultants, clients, and service users are bound by the Code of Conduct.

The *Board of Governance* is responsible for organisational culture, including a biennial review of *organisation name*'s Code of Conduct in consultation with staff.

The *Chief Executive Officer* is responsible for ensuring the Code of Conduct is provided to all persons identified in the scope, and for ensuring all persons understand their obligations with respect to the Code of Conduct.

Code of Conduct Example

The following is a sample Code of Conduct that demonstrates the types of behaviours and values your organisation may choose to solidify in writing.

We will:

- Treat everyone with respect, courtesy and sensitivity, taking into account people's individual experiences and views.
- Strive to build a harmonious workplace based on values in action.
- Always act in an inclusive and non-discriminatory manner towards all persons.
- Act with honesty and integrity and make decisions that are fair and equitable.
- Perform our work fairly and honestly and to the best of our ability.
- Apply our skills, knowledge and experience with due diligence and care.
- Follow all lawful and reasonable direction.
- Uphold the organisation's vision, mission and values.
- Comply with all relevant legislation, standards and other compliance mechanisms.
- Refrain from providing false or misleading information in relation to the organisation, its staff, or service users.
- Be accountable for our own actions.

[Name of Community Group] – Driver Agreement

All drivers need to agree to the **code of conduct** of the [Name of Community Group] while driving the vehicle and promoting the service.

Drivers should be aware of their responsibilities and obligations listed below:

Drivers:

- Must hold a full [name of State of Australia] driver's license.
- In Victoria – must hold a valid Working with Children Check (WWCC).
- Must hold a National Police Check.
- Must complete the driver training and induction with a member of the [Name of Community Group] to be authorised as fit and able to drive.
- Are covered under the [Name of Community Group] vehicle insurance. Should there be an incident or accident, the [Name of Community Group] will pay any excess. An **incident report** will be required to be completed. Information about what to do can be found in the Driver's Manual located in the vehicle which the driver should be familiar with.
- Must comply with all road rules and regulations. Any traffic infringements or speeding fines will be the responsibility of the driver. This includes use of a mobile phone or GPS that is not secured by a VicRoads approved holder or cannot be operated by the driver without touching any part of the phone.
- Advise [Name of Community Group] if unwell, fatigued and unable to drive.
- Consume NO alcohol or drugs or be taking prescription medication that induces drowsiness or has warnings against driving or operating machinery.
- Ensure NO smoking or use of e-cigarettes in the vehicle. *Consider installing no-smoking signs inside the vehicle*.
- Can only carry a maximum of [#] passengers may be carried in the vehicle. Passengers must remain seated with seatbelt fastened.
- Are required to do a pre-drive inspection before each shift and complete post-drive inspection and submit. *This process needs to be developed in accordance with what information you need and why, and to ensure any issues noted or needing attention can be actioned swiftly by the [Name of Community Group].*
- Are encouraged to keep the vehicle as clean as possible.
- Have fun and enjoy the drive!

Optional things to consider – to be decided by individual community groups - Drivers:

- May be responsible for taking cash or card donations during the shift.
- Eating or drinking is not permitted in the vehicle. *If not permitted, consider installing no eating/drinking signs inside the vehicle*.
- May carry children under the age of 7 if an appropriate child restraint or booster seat is provided by the [Community Group or Passengers] passengers booking the service. *This is the rule in Victoria and individual community groups will need to decide how this might work in their circumstance. Other states may have different rules*.

[Name of Community Group] and logo if any

- Can refuse bulky items in the vehicle unless negotiated at time of booking.
- Must notify the [Name of Community Group] of any changes to license including change of address, change of name, license renewal, loss of demerit points, driving suspension.
- Are willing to assist passengers, as needed, to get items on and off the vehicle. *This is optional and might need further thought by each organisation, but the 'customer service' aspect can win a new user over through a positive experience*.

☐ I have read, understand, and agree to comply with this Driver's Agreement.

Name of Driver:

Signature: **Date**:

Office use only:

Original on file with [Name of Community Group], noted on database, and copy to driver.

[Name of Community Group] and logo if any

[Name of Community Group] - Driver Details

Personal details

First name:	Surname:
Address:	Date of Birth:
Licence No.	Expiry:
Licence Type:	Conditions:

Are you a probationary Licence Holder	Yes / No
Are you under the age of 25 or do you have less than 2 years driving experience?	Yes / No
Have you lost your licence, or had it suspended for any reason during the last 10 years?	Yes / No

If you answered yes to any of the above, we are currently unable to put you on as a volunteer driver. Once you meet the above requirements, we would be happy to reconsider you as a volunteer driver.

It is a requirement that all volunteers have a valid Working with Children Check (WWCC) and Police Check.

WWCC Card No:	Type: Employee / Volunteer	Expiry:
Polic Check Type:	Category:	Date:

Communication

As bookings are received the [name of role] will communicate with volunteer drivers using [name of chat platform] *(Community group to decide which platform eg* WhatsApp *or* Messenger *will be used)*.

Are you comfortable using [name of chat platform]?	Yes / No
Do you require assistance to install [name of chat platform] on your personal mobile device?	Yes / No
Do you require training to use [name of chat platform] on your personal mobile device?	Yes / No

[Name of Community Group] and logo if any

Declaration:

I confirm that the information I have provided is true and correct. I also agree to **immediately** advise the [Name of Community Group] of any changes to licence or WWCC conditions.

Signature:	Date:

Office use:

Action	**Tick**
Licence sighted – confirm Australian licence	
- Confirm licence number is visible and correct	
- Confirm licence is valid and has not expired	
- Confirm the address on the form matches address on the licence	
WWCC sighted – confirm details correct	
Police check sighted – confirm details correct and no disclosable court outcomes	
OK to use [name of chat platform]	Yes / No
Needs help to install and training to use [name of chat platform]	Yes / No
Name:	**Date:**
Signature:	

[Name of Community Group] and logo if any

[Name of Community Group] – Driver Induction, Training and Evaluation

Item	Detail	Date of induction / evaluation
Name of Driver:		
Responsibilities		
	Understands Driver Agreement (code of conduct, policies, procedures, responsibilities, obligations, incident reports)	
Vehicle knowledge		
	Able to access keys	
	Able to do a pre-drive inspection	
	Able to check battery charge	
	Able to locate fuel cap/charging cable	
	Able to locate Driver's Manual/Emergency /Breakdown Procedures *(ensure these contain contact numbers for emergency services, local police, Roadside Assist provider, [Name of Community Group] people)*	
Operational knowledge		
	Able to operate vehicle controls including knowing where handbrake, hazard lights, and aircon controls are located	
	Able to unlock and lock all doors	
	Able to adjust seats and mirrors	
	Able to operate wheelchair equipment	
	Able to **Start** and **Stop** vehicle	
	Able to drive vehicle safely and correctly	
	Able to forward/parallel/reverse park	
	Able to refuel or recharge at different charging ports	
	Able to use vehicle mobile phone	
Administration requirements		
	Able to complete post-drive inspection and submit	
	Knows what to do in an emergency or where to locate the information in the vehicle (incident report)	
Completed by		
Name of assessor:		
Signature		
Name of Driver:		
Signature		
Information entered on [Name of Community Group] database		

[Name of Community Group] and logo if any

[Name of Community Group] - Driver Log

Name of Driver:	
Date:	Time:
Pick-up location:	
Destination:	
Odometer reading:	Fuel / Battery charge:
Pre-drive inspection	
☐ Tyre pressure / no wear / no damage	☐ Body no damage – doors open and close
☐ Lights checked and working	☐ Windscreen clean – no damage
☐ Interior/exterior clean	☐ Charging cables in vehicle (if EV)
☐ Wheelchair lift operational if required for booking	
Post-drive details	
Time:	Total hours:
Odometer reading:	Fuel / Battery charge:
Total number of passengers:	Donation amount: $ ☐ online ☐ card ☐ cash
Post-drive inspection	
☐ Interior/exterior clean	
☐ Seatbelts retracted	
Any issues identified with the vehicle?	
Other comments:	

Submit the log when completed to [identify where to submit to]

[Name of Community Group] and logo if any

[Name of Community Group] – Driver Manual

Cover sheet – include logo

The purpose of the **driver manual** is to assist volunteers who may only drive irregularly and lose familiarity with the vehicle, processes, requirements.

A copy should be easily accessible in the vehicle and volunteer drivers might also wish to have their own copy to refer to as needed.

As each community will have different vehicles and processes, this document provides suggestions to include in the manual for volunteer drivers.

Vehicle information

- Provide information relating to the vehicle, particularly vehicles that are newer, and have technology that may be unfamiliar to volunteer drivers.
- How to unlock/lock.
- How to start/stop and what to do if the vehicle will not start.
- How to use heating/cooling and the various controls that might exist.
- How to refuel (be that petrol/diesel/EV).

  Consider developing a comprehensive EV charging document which details the location of compatible charging stations in your local area and instructions on how to use them. Charging stations vary considerably according to the provider of the charging station infrastructure and for those less familiar with EVs, they can be challenging to navigate. The information will also need to provide step by step instructions on how to operate apps for payment if tap and go payment not possible or there is no organisation purchasing card that could facilitate payments required.
- How to operate the wheelchair lift (if installed)
- How to complete pre-drive inspection and post-drive inspection and process for reporting any issues found.
- If EV, how to locate and operate any isolation switch.
- Expectations of driver relating to vehicle cleanliness and presentation.

Phone

- Instructions on how to use the phone and associated apps
- **Key contacts**

  [Role]: [0123 456 789]

  [Role - backup]: [0123 456 789]

  Emergency Services **000**

  Local Police Station [00 1234 5678]

Roadside Assist [12 34 56] (put membership number in notes section)

- **APPS**
  - VicEmergency (or alternative local app)
  - EmergencyPlus
  - PlugShare (EV)
  - WhatsApp/Messenger (or other volunteer messaging platform used)

Payments

- How to take payments *(if applicable)*
- Credit card in Google/Apple wallet

Paperwork

- Remind drivers of their obligation to provide any updates or changes to license details to the [Name of Community Group].
- Explain the **Driver Log**, how to complete, and any process for submitting/filing for entering in relevant database recording all drives. Include blank form for reference. Any Driver Manual in the vehicle needs to have a good supply of blank forms (and pen) available to drivers.
- **Emergency Management Plan** – to guide drivers what to do in the event of any incident or accident.

Supporting documents

Copies of relevant documents for easy reference:

- **FAQs** to allow the volunteer to answer any questions from passengers
- **Code of Conduct / Breach of Code of Conduct**
- **Privacy Policy**
- **Driver Agreement** - blank
- **Incident Report** - any Driver Manual in the vehicle needs to have a good supply of blank forms (and pen) available.
- **Roadside Assist** membership information

Not essential, but may be useful

- *Insurance information*
- *Vehicle manual/warranty information*
- *Registration/accreditation information*

[Name of Community Group] and logo if any

Emergency Management Plan

This information will be available in multiple locations including in the vehicle.
This plan provides details of what to do in the case of an emergency or accident.
Carry out this plan when there is injury/danger to the driver, passengers or vehicle.

Instructions for Driver

In the case of any emergency, you should contact the appropriate emergency services immediately on **000**. [Name of Community Group] should also be advised.

Have the following information available when contacting emergency services

- Open Emergency Plus APP on the vehicle phone
- Note 'what3words'
- Nature of the emergency
- Number and nature of injuries (if applicable)
- Your location (repeat what3words)
- Hazards which may exist for rescue personnel attending
- Vehicle owner details (see below)
- The telephone number you are calling on (provide number if vehicle phone)
- Your assessment of the situation

[Name of Community Group] contact information

[Role]: [0123 456 789] **Address:** [registered address]

[Role - backup]: [0123 456 789]

Other contacts

Local Police Station [00 1234 5678]

Roadside Assist [12 34 56]

Additional Considerations

- Your priority is towards the safety of yourself and your passengers – all other actions are secondary to this priority.
- In the event of damage to an electric vehicle, IF safe to do, isolate the vehicle using the most safely accessible isolation switch.
- Assess the situation and should an evacuation of the vehicle be required, or possible, use the most appropriate method-exit, remaining calm, speaking slowly and clearly, directing passengers to the safest off-vehicle location.
- Keep passengers informed of the progress of any action to be taken.
  e.g. ETA of emergency services, ETA of replacement transportation.
- Where possible, remain with the passengers and only leave them to seek assistance as a last resort.
- If appropriate, render first aid treatment and delegate tasks e.g. head counts, protection of the scene to responsible passengers.
  NOTE: First aid treatment should only be provided to the extent of your qualified training and experience.
- Once evacuated, do not re-board the bus to obtain property unless given permission from emergency services.

Unforeseen Events:

- For situations such as bushfire, flood, items across roadways you should always follow the instructions of local Police/CFA/SES/Emergency Services.
- In extreme weather conditions, monitor the appropriate official warning channels and abide by any advice to avoid certain areas.

- If Emergency Services personnel require you to travel off your normal route, where practical, this information should be relayed to the [Name of Community Group].

INCIDENT REPORTING AND INVESTIGATION

Reporting

If the vehicle is involved in an incident that meets the criteria specified on the **Safe Transport Victoria website** (an online form supplied by Safe Transport Victoria and utilised by the [Name of Community Group]) the following operational procedure is to be followed:

1. Vehicle driver or staff member to contact the [role] or if unavailable call [0123 456 789].
2. The [role] will, as soon as possible, contact Safe Transport Victoria on the **STV Hot Line 1800 301 151** and provide details of the incident.
3. The STV Hot Line number is stored in the vehicle's phone if the [role] is unavailable.
4. As soon as practical, the driver will complete the Incident Report and the [role] will complete the notification form online and submit.

Investigation

Serious incidents may be investigated by both the [Name of Community Group] and STV as follows:

- If requested to by STV, an investigation will commence within 7 days after receiving a notification in writing.
- The [Name of Community Group] may elect to investigate without the direction of STV within 60 days of the incident.
- A copy of any completed investigation report is to be provided to STV.

VEHICLE NON-OPERATIONAL / OPERATIONAL ISSUES

Vehicle Accident / Damage to vehicle

1. Where possible, ensure vehicle is in a safe location and turn on hazard lights.
2. If an electric vehicle, isolate the main battery using the most accessible isolation switch, only IF safe to do so.
3. Ensure all passengers are OK.
    - if any injuries call **000** and the [role]
    - If no injury, call the [role]
4. Use the incident report in vehicle folder/driver's manual to document the incident and record details of any witnesses and all other vehicles involved. Collect information including names of all drivers, license details, date of birth, address, vehicle registration. Draw a sketch of the incident site, make notes of the sequence of events leading up to the incident.
5. Report to [role] as soon as practical.

Vehicle breakdown (may include lack of fuel, a flat tyre, mechanical failure or other)

1. Park in a flat area clear of traffic
2. Call the [role] to update schedule and any affected passengers
3. Call Roadside Assist – [12 34 56] to request assistance:
    - Quote membership number – [number]
    - Vehicle registration – [numberplate ID]
    - Any other information that may be relevant such as roadside assist inclusions
4. When Roadside Assist arrive, get all passengers to a safe place clear of the vehicle.
5. Follow any relevant instructions in Driver's Manual.

Potential scenarios *how will community group manage scenarios such as a driver becoming unwell, a passenger behaving inappropriately or becoming unwell? Consider including some instructions to guide drivers.*

[Name of Community Group] - FAQs

People do come up with lots of questions, so we have developed a list of the questions most likely to be asked with some suggestions for what to cover in the answers. The answers will very much be dependent on your organisation and context – there is no one way to do this.

This list is not exhaustive but a starting point, and as you get questions, make sure you add to your FAQs, and review regularly to ensure they continue to provide the correct information, because as the service settles and develops, you will make changes to how it operates and reflecting in the FAQs is one way to manage expectations and prevent misunderstandings and possible community conflicts.

FAQs should not be 'set and forget', but rather managed as a living document that evolves as the service evolves.

Question	**What to include in answer**
Who can use the [name of transport service]?	Be clear about who can use the service. EG *The bus may be used by any local residents, local groups, holiday makers or visitors to [name of town/area]*. *It can be booked for an individual rider, a family, or any group wishing to travel together*. We also suggest explaining the need (if there is one) for appropriate provision of restraints for children under 7 as they apply in your state and to your particular vehicle. In Victoria this link may help. *In Victoria children under the age of 7 must use an appropriate child restraint or booster seat which needs to be provided by the passengers booking the service*.
Why do I need to pay/donate?	If not accredited, and you are not subsidised, then you may need to seek donations to operate the service. Give a reason for the 'WHY'.
Where does the money/donation go?	Explain what payments/donations are used for, especially if volunteers/administrators are volunteers and there is no subsidy being received from other sources like government.
How much will it cost me?	Although you may be seeking a donation, people and administrators find it easier if there are suggested amounts. Obviously it

	can be increased or decreased as needed, but have some ideas to suggest to people.
How will I pay?	Explain how money can be donated/paid – will you accept pre-payment, cash, online payment to bank account or card payment online, card payment in the vehicle?
Can the service be booked for a group excursion, day trip or private event?	If the answer is yes, clarify subject to availability and check if exclusive use is an expectation of the person making the booking at time of booking before confirming.
How many people can fit in the vehicle?	Include passengers, requirements for child restraints as applicable and any other features like wheelchair capability.
Where does the vehicle go?	This will give potential users ideas about what is possible and what is not and any restriction that may come into play such as charging facilities/range for EVs.
Where do I get picked up?	Provide information about what is offered around pick ups and whether there is flexibility.
Do I need to book?	Explain any limits on when bookings need to be made by and explain why. EG *We ask you to book 24 hours in advance so we can ensure the vehicle and a driver is available, and the vehicle is charged and ready to go. Please call us to discuss anything more immediate but be aware we are a group of volunteers delivering this service in our spare time. We will do our best to assist, but it may not always be possible.*
How do I book?	Provide options for bookings: ▪ Online ▪ Email ▪ Phone Not everyone can manage online, and many people using the service will prefer the human contact, especially when new to the service. Over time they can be made more comfortable booking online, but initially many passengers do prefer to call and have a discussion.

Booking requests/cancellation cut off times.	It is very stressful when people request a pickup at **very** short notice. Ensure you are clear about what may or may not be possible. EG *We ask you to book 24 hours in advance so we can ensure the vehicle and a driver is available, and the vehicle is charged and ready to go. Please call us to discuss anything more immediate but be aware we are a group of volunteers delivering this service in our spare time. We will do our best to assist, but it may not always be possible.*
How do I cancel or change a booking?	Ensure there is an easy way for people to cancel or change when 'life happens' – a phone number is good.
Who drives the vehicle?	Explain who your drivers are and how drivers are allocated. EG *Our drivers are local volunteers, they are all licensed and trained, have a current Working With Children Check (WWCC). When a booking is requested, we allocate to an available driver.*
Can I drive the vehicle myself for my group booking?	Explain if you will allow this or not
Can I access the service with a wheelchair?	Advise if you can take a passenger with a wheelchair and if so, suggest this information is provided when booking to ensure a suitable driver is allocated.
I am travelling with a child – do you provide booster/child seats?	Advise if passengers should BYO child restraints which may be needed and again advise the rules regarding transporting children for your state. You may wish to alert them that the volunteer driver may refuse to transport the child unless appropriately restrained.
Can I have luggage / surfboard / bike / pram / other bulky goods?	Be aware of what can and cannot be carried and explain in the answer to manage expectations of travellers. Your vehicle may not have space for storing items safely if every seat is taken up by a passenger. Items placed in the aisle could become a safety issue.

	EG *Storage is limited and if the vehicle is full, items may need to be carried on your lap. Please let us know if you are bringing any bulky items so we can plan for space on board. At this stage we cannot carry bicycles but are exploring ways to offer this service in the future.*
Can I travel with my pet? If I can, do I need to book a seat for my pet as well?	This question has arisen, often people needing to take their pet to the vet. This question needs some thought to manage expectations in a way that is fair. Other passengers may find large pets intimidating, or have allergies which would be triggered with close proximity to animals, so this will require careful consideration by the community group.
What is expected of passengers being transported on this service?	Think about behaviours you want to encourage and discourage. EG *We expect our volunteers to treat everyone with respect and care. We expect passengers to behave in a respectful and courteous manner towards our volunteers and other passengers.*
Can I eat or drink in the vehicle?	Think about whether you will allow this or not. What if a passenger is drinking alcohol and is subsequently unwell – who will be responsible for cleaning up, will an additional charge be levied on the passenger? If not allowed, consider having signage inside the vehicle.
Can I smoke or vape in the vehicle	Smoking or vaping is not allowed in the vehicle. Consider installing no-smoking/vaping signs inside the vehicle.
Who runs the [name of community transport service]?	Provide information about who is delivering the service and be clear to inform if volunteers are involved.
Can I volunteer to help?	If you want volunteers, explain how they can get in touch and maybe have some examples of the volunteer work available to operate the service.

I want to provide feedback	Let people know how you would like to receive positive and negative feedback about the service.
Do you have another question?	Make use of a link to an email with pre-populated subject heading or online contact form to take other questions that people may have.

[Name of Community Group] - Incident Report

The incident report (injury, incident or near miss) must be reported to the [name of person/position/organisation] as soon as practical after the incident. A copy needs to be emailed to [email address] for record keeping purposes.

In the event of a serious incident, please call [name of person] on [mobile phone number].

Brief incident information

Date of incident:		**Time of incident:**		**Weather conditions:**	
Name:			**Date of birth:**		
Phone number:			**License number:**		
Address:					
Location of incident:					
Nature and extent of any injuries:					
Incident description: *(What happened?)*					
Witness Name:			**Contact phone number:**		
Incident reported to:			**Date reported:**		

Property/equipment damage

Extent of damage to property/equipment:	
Vehicle registration or equipment details:	

Third parties involved

Name, license details, and contact information:	
Nature and extent of injuries:	
Extent of damage to other property/equipment:	

Diagram of the incident *(include landmarks, street names, traffic lights, etc as relevant)*

(Hint - photographs of the site, vehicles, damage and other information could be helpful)

Record of actions taken *(Describe actions taken to contain/control this incident)*

Incident statement acknowledgement

Name of person making report:	Signed:	Date:

Incident report received and actioned as required

Name of person receiving report:	Signed:	Date:	Incident number:

Privacy Policy Template (sourced from Business Victoria)

How to use this template

The information in this template provides some base content for you to use and modify with information that relates to your specific privacy policy. Follow the steps below:

1. Replace the bold items in square brackets with your business information
2. Update content to align with your business's privacy policy
3. Create or update the privacy policy page on your website using the updated text.

Privacy Policy

[Your business name] is committed to providing quality services to you and this policy outlines our ongoing obligations to you in respect of how we manage your Personal Information.

We have adopted the Australian Privacy Principles (APPs) contained in the Privacy Act 1988 (Cth) (the Privacy Act). The NPPs govern the way in which we collect, use, disclose, store, secure and dispose of your Personal Information.

A copy of the Australian Privacy Principles may be obtained from the website of The Office of the Australian Information Commissioner at https://www.oaic.gov.au/.

What is Personal Information and why do we collect it?

Personal Information is information or an opinion that identifies an individual. Examples of Personal Information we collect includes names, addresses, email addresses, phone and facsimile numbers.

This Personal Information is obtained in many ways including **[interviews, correspondence, by telephone and facsimile, by email, via our website www.yourbusinessname.com.au, from your website, from media and publications, from other publicly available sources, from cookies- delete all that aren't applicable]** and from third parties. We don't guarantee website links or policy of authorised third parties.

We collect your Personal Information for the primary purpose of providing our services to you, providing information to our clients and marketing. We may also use your Personal Information for secondary purposes closely related to the primary purpose, in circumstances where you would reasonably expect such use or disclosure. You may unsubscribe from our mailing/marketing lists at any time by contacting us in writing.

When we collect Personal Information we will, where appropriate and where possible, explain to you why we are collecting the information and how we plan to use it.

Sensitive Information

Sensitive information is defined in the Privacy Act to include information or opinion about such things as an individual's racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, membership of a political association, religious or philosophical beliefs, membership of a trade union or other professional body, criminal record or health information.

Sensitive information will be used by us only:

- For the primary purpose for which it was obtained
- For a secondary purpose that is directly related to the primary purpose
- With your consent; or where required or authorised by law.

Third Parties

Where reasonable and practicable to do so, we will collect your Personal Information only from you. However, in some circumstances we may be provided with information by third parties. In such a case we will take reasonable steps to ensure that you are made aware of the information provided to us by the third party.

Disclosure of Personal Information

Your Personal Information may be disclosed in a number of circumstances including the following:

- Third parties where you consent to the use or disclosure; and
- Where required or authorised by law.

Security of Personal Information

Your Personal Information is stored in a manner that reasonably protects it from misuse and loss and from unauthorized access, modification or disclosure.

When your Personal Information is no longer needed for the purpose for which it was obtained, we will take reasonable steps to destroy or permanently de-identify your Personal Information. However, most of the Personal Information is or will be stored in client files which will be kept by us for a minimum of 7 years.

Access to your Personal Information

You may access the Personal Information we hold about you and to update and/or correct it, subject to certain exceptions. If you wish to access your Personal Information, please contact us in writing.

[Your business name] will not charge any fee for your access request, but may charge an administrative fee for providing a copy of your Personal Information.

In order to protect your Personal Information we may require identification from you before releasing the requested information.

Maintaining the Quality of your Personal Information

It is an important to us that your Personal Information is up to date. We will take reasonable steps to make sure that your Personal Information is accurate, complete and up-to-date. If you find that the information we have is not up to date or is inaccurate, please advise us as soon as practicable so we can update our records and ensure we can continue to provide quality services to you.

Policy Updates

This Policy may change from time to time and is available on our website.

Privacy Policy Complaints and Enquiries

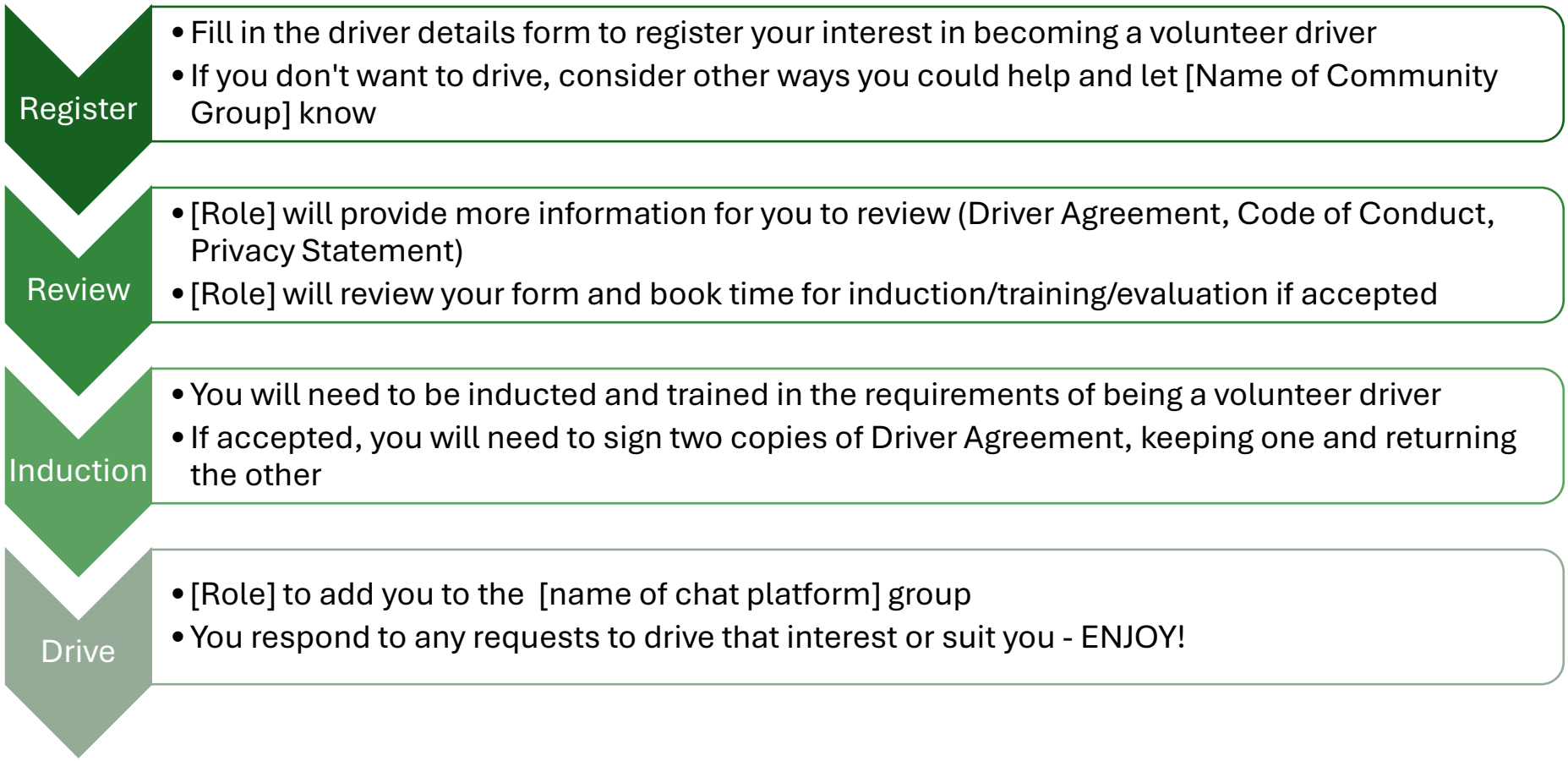
If you have any queries or complaints about our Privacy Policy please contact us at:

[Your business address]

[Your business email address]

[Your business phone number]

Becoming a volunteer driver for [Name if Community Group] and logo if any



[Name of Community Group] and logo if any

Vehicle Maintenance Log

*The idea of this record is to record **all** the vehicle maintenance that may take place in one place. The community needs to decide on whether there should be 'in-house' checks weekly/fortnightly/monthly. The scheduled servicing that may be undertaken by a qualified mechanic, or any repairs such as tyre replacements can be included here but will be complemented with the relevant documentation provided by the service centre. Finally, any annual checks as required by licensing bodies can also be noted in this sheet so that the one document summarises all things relating to the maintenance and upkeep of the vehicle for the [Name of Community Group].*

If necessary, provide instructions about what should be done if a problem is found – who needs to be notified and who takes responsibility for getting it fixed?

Date of check	Kms	Lights	Tyre pressure and wear	Check fluid levels			Windscreen	Windscreen wipers and fluid	Fire extinguisher *(check expiry date)*	Other/comments *(note if a scheduled service by mechanic)*	Name of person conducting check
				Brake	Coolant	Steering					