

Edinburgh had the best-known car-share club in Britain. Will the embryo UK car-share movement recover from its collapse? Andrea Smith reports.

On January 10, 2001, Budget Rent-A-Car told City of Edinburgh Council that it was pulling out of city's car share club.

The demise of the two-year-old car club was a poor omen for the car-share movement which had appeared to be at last gaining ground in the UK.

According to Antonia Roberts, development manager of the not-for-profit Community Car Share Network (CCSN), more than 100,000 people car-share on mainland Europe. However, in the UK car-sharing had been limited to a number of private arrangements, such as Rusty Vehicle Sharing Club in Leicester.

It began 25 years ago when a group of friends who - even if they shared the costs - could still only afford a rusty vehicle, pooled their resources and bought a car, divvying up costs in proportion to use. Rusty now serves 13 households and has six vehicles - none of them rusty - but it is still essentially a network of acquaintances.

Edinburgh's City Car Club was an attempt to make car-sharing more widely available.

Budget had invested more than £200,000 in two years in the club and was not expecting to break even until the end of year three.

However, at the end of the second year, the club had 170 members, rather than the anticipated 500 and the company as a whole had just experienced record losses. It decided to withdraw.

A new partner is being sought by the city council which backed the club along with the then Scottish Office and Department of Transport. But what can be learnt from the City Car Club experience?

Budget said: "The scheme originally had four parking stations. That was quickly increased and further expanded to 22.

"The original parking stations did prove popular, but many of the additional ones were either not used or little-used."

It said that more thorough research should have been conducted into their siting, although the city council says that Budget got the stations more or less where it wanted them.

Professor David Begg, chairman of the Commission for Integrated Transport (CfIT), played a major role in setting up City Car Club.

He said: "Twenty-six cars were introduced in the first year. It was too much. The lesson learnt is not to grow too quickly."

Budget may not agree with that. It reckons exponential growth is the key to success, but the vogue among the latest generation of clubs is for small beginnings.

Ian Saxon, who managed City Car Club, is now running Avis' scheme in Oxford which has four cars and 70 members.

The CCSN is also aiding on eight small schemes to get off the ground of which four have launched. Best in Bristol is typical.

There the city council has pump-primed a two-car club with £13,000 to pay for booking software, the installation of a monitoring system for the cars, and promotion of the scheme.

A council spokesperson said: "In Bristol this could have considerable potential in reducing the number of car trips made and making public transport more viable."

Bristol's hopes for the scheme are based on statistics from countries such as Switzerland, which has a national car-share club with 25,000 members, and Germany which has several city schemes.

StadtAuto car-sharing club began in Bremen in 1990 with 28 people sharing three cars. The fleet has now grown to 90 with 2,300 members in a city with about 540,000 inhabitants.

Michael Glotz-Richter, of Bremen's building and environment department, said that car-sharing had led to a reduction of 3.4 million miles driven a year.

The explanation is simply that people are more likely to consider other means of transport if they do not have a car sitting outside their door.

Glotz-Richter said that one third of new members have joined the club as an alternative to buying a car and the club is estimated to have led to 500-700 less private cars on Bremen's roads.

Public transport operators in the city and Wuppertal, Germany, see the business benefits in working with car-share clubs.

In Wuppertal a public transport company runs the car club booking service while in Bremen the smart card used to access car club vehicles doubles as a public transport pass.

This has led to new season ticket clients for the public transport company with a 24 per cent increase in those opting for annual season tickets.

Helen Holland, the executive member for environment, transport and leisure at Bristol City Council, highlighted the importance of car clubs in giving people greater mobility.

She said: "A survey among New Deal clients in Bristol showed that transport was the prime reason why people could not get into employment."

In Leicester, Rusty's van and estates are used by several of its members for work including a handyman and carpenter.

From an urban planning perspective, car-share clubs reduce the demand for car-parking spaces, allowing land to be used for amenities or higher housing densities.

Property developers, such as Taywood Homes and St James's Homes, are talking about providing car share clubs as an integral part of new housing schemes.

Even motor manufacturers are supporting car clubs. Kevin Moxey, corporate and environmental executive at Vauxhall Motors, said: "We see ourselves more as mobility-providers rather than as a traditional car-maker. Our frame of reference is changing quite quickly."

It has provided the CCSN with lease vehicles at preferential rates - including 20 free of charge for one year.

The two cars in Bristol have been provided through CCSN's lease agreement with Vauxhall.

Vauxhall hopes these connections will led to long-term business opportunities.

But the environment wins too if drivers use newer, well-maintained vehicles, according to Moxey. "It takes 50 modern cars to produce the same level of pollution as one 1970s vehicle. If car clubs could take some of the older vehicles off the road, it would be good," he said.

So who joins car share clubs?

Initially it is green-minded folk, said Chas Ball of Smart Moves, a company which offers advice and administrative support to car share clubs.

But there are financial advantages for low-mileage motorists, according to CCSN. It calculates that motorists who drive less than 8,000 miles a year could be better off by car-sharing.

Car share clubs can also offer members a choice of vehicles from hatchbacks to vans.

However, DETR has yet to be convinced of the role of car-sharing in a sustainable transport policy.

Its funding of CCSN ended in March, although the organisation will continue.

Meanwhile DETR has commissioned research from CfIT on car-sharing, particularly in rural areas.

Steve Grayson, of DETR, said: "We are asking whether car clubs give some people the opportunity to drive more i.e. 'I cannot afford to buy a car, but I might be able to afford to rent one'.

"We cannot be absolutely sure that they will not lead to more car journeys in the UK, although there is more evidence that it's like the European picture."

Begg, however, is certain of car-sharing's usefulness. He said: "I can think of no other single transport policy that hits so many objectives." And since in Switzerland car-share club members hop on their bikes for an average extra 497 miles a year, Begg suggests that it could even make us healthier too.

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