

Clubbing together

Richard Johnstone examines a decade of car-sharing clubs

It is a year for a lot of ten-year anniversaries – Peter Mandelson's first Cabinet comeback, devolution, Miss Scotland and the creation of Edinburgh City Car Club.

This last anniversary will be debated at a conference on March 19, examining the progress that the concept has made since its Scottish debut in March 1999.

The concept originated in 1996, when, according to Chas Ball, the founder of Edinburgh operator City Car Clubs, some businesses were examining the potential of a car club based on those seen in Europe, where clubs own cars which are parked in accessible locations to be used by members.

Ball, now an independent consultant, said: "Car clubs in Europe go back about 18 years, and developed as a concept in Switzerland and Germany most significantly, and in the 1990s, people got to know about it.

"It became clear it's something you could do here, and the issue was how to make it work, given that in those days the technology was still primitive," and the company that would become City Car Club, originally called Smart Moves, began to examine the market.

Ball originally did an experimental sharing of a car and kept a note of what it was like to do it. "You begin to understand what it costs to run a car, and then you begin to look at the logistics. Through that process, ourselves and other guys who had studied car clubs in Germany, we set up a company, with a view to trying to develop a business around providing. We were developing the wherewithal to do it, the technology and the software, and in parallel with the initial period of Edinburgh City Car Club."

Starting life as a demonstration project involving the UK Government's Department for Transport, the Scottish Office and then Executive, and City of Edinburgh Council, the first contract to run the Edinburgh car club, initially in Marchmont and Sciennes, was won by



**Chief executive
James Finlayson**

Budget Rent A Car. After less than three years of running it, Budget announced that they would no longer.

At this point, as City of Edinburgh Council looked for an alternative operator, Ball said "there was a whole report done by the Scottish Executive that researched how well it was doing as a demonstration project, so a lot of effort went into monitoring it, but it didn't stack up as far as Budget were concerned, so

in some people's mind, it was perceived of as a failure at that point."

Ball bid to run the project, and despite a delay between Budget Rent A Car's withdrawal and Smart Moves entering the fray months later, with a new improved technology for access to the car, he was confident there was a market.

"To the credit of Edinburgh City Council, they were determined to keep it going. They realised that although it was a setback that Budget didn't want to run it and the technology wasn't that brilliant, actually, there were 200 or 300 people who were very interested in it, and some were using it instead of owning a car, some businesses were using it, and once we got going again in earnest, we built the membership back up."

Ball left the company about 18 months ago, and James Finlayson, the current chief executive, said that now the company, which operates in London, Edinburgh (the biggest operation out-with London), Bath, Brighton, Bristol, Norwich, Birmingham, has 9,000 members across the UK, and 2,500 members in Edinburgh, with 90 cars in the city, and plans for up to 110.

City Car Club's annual membership cost is £50, £25 on renewal, while rental hire of a standard car (such as a Ford Fiesta) is £4.95 for one hour, and £49.50 for 24 hours, while larger cars (such as a Vauxhall Astra or Honda Civic Hybrid) cost £5.95 and £59.50 respectively.

For the customer, Finlayson said "that financial reasons will remain the number one thing," with members joining to save money on car ownership. However, he adds: "But I would expect a little bit going forward after that, that the green issue will come up higher than the cost savings, and that will be the continuing drive going forward. But it will very much go hand in hand all along the way anyway, because we will always save [drivers] money, and we'll always be a greener alternative to car ownership. It's very sustainable from that point of

view as a business model, and a choice for someone to be able to adopt and use a service like this rather than owning a car.”

Antonia Roberts, the Co-Director of Carplus, said that the group – which will also celebrate its tenth anniversary this year – was established as the national charity promoting responsible car use. “It was set up by one of the commercial companies at the time, who saw the need for an umbrella body to look at the industry with a voice to national and local government and different partners, so we could reach out and represent the industry as a whole.”

She said that the industry has seen “exponential growth” in recent years. In London, where, she said, the congestion charge and a large network of on-street parking bays, has led the way, while Edinburgh has grown strongly too. However, she adds that “elsewhere across the country it’s been quite patchy, through lack of investment and lack of restrictions on parking and driving that complement sustainable transport.”

She doesn’t see car clubs as just for city dwellers, saying, “it depends on what model you use”.

“Right at the other end of the scale, there are people sharing cars with their neighbours on a voluntary basis, without it even occurring to them that that might be called a car club, and then in between, there’s a growing sector of community-based car clubs that are taking that formal model, and using it for the whole community.”

She said Carplus had plans for a national network, to develop what’s done in London outside of London and to provide the option for people to join a car club instead of owning a car.

This would be a four-year programme, she said, but last autumn Carplus had a negative response from the DfT. “[They said] it wasn’t the right way forward for car clubs, but they failed to then explain what they did think was the right way forward,” Roberts said.

She argued that: “I think there’s evidence that car clubs are really a catalyst to smarter choices working, so people might say, ‘ok, if I give up my car for a car club, then it’ll be great to have a bike to get down to the local shop’, or you’re more likely to think about commuting by public transport, so they are also a way of buying in that benefit.”

A report by the Environmental Change Institute, University of Oxford

backs this up, finding that former car owners increase their use of other transport modes by 40 per cent after joining a car club and decrease their car use by 15 per cent.

Roberts adds: “If car clubs develop in little pockets, here and there, that will work to some degree, but by doing it in a co-ordinated fashion where infrastructure can be shared, where lessons can be learned from one place to another, where there can be tie ups between different partners, there’s lots of elements that can be enhanced by doing it in a national co-ordinated way, integration with public transport and smart-card technology, all those things need resources and co-ordination and that’s lacking at the moment.”

There have been discussions with the Scottish Government, she said, but adds: “I think one of the biggest frustrations is Glasgow, it would be a fantastic location.” Finlayson says that City Car Club would “in an ideal world like to be doing something [in Glasgow] by the end of the year at least. In our business plan we did have it from the third quarter of this year.”

Asked what factors will influence car-club growth, Finlayson highlights being in enough locations as the primary factor, alongside “to a minor degree, the economy, [so] overall, it will be positive.”

“Some cities that are not as forward thinking yet with car clubs, and haven’t adopted any on-street parking whatsoever, and that’s the only thing that would really hold us back, because we know how long it can take to be able to find the funding to create a scheme, so I think the locations are probably the most limiting factor of all.”

However, Finlayson, who is an investor in City Car Clubs as well as the chief executive, sees a bright future: “I’ve got every confidence, and I think everyone in the sector has, that we’re probably at a relatively early stage yet of car clubs, and my guess is that within five years, every major city will have a large presence of car clubs, and [it] will become much more mainstream than it is now, and I think right across the world, effectively, every major city will have a car-club operation that will become very mainstream and that should very much go hand in hand with encouraging more people to use public transport. I, as a commercial business person, believe there is a long way to run on this one.” **HM**

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NEW AIRPORT INFRASTRUCTURE PANEL TO INVESTIGATE AVIATION FUTURE

The Institution of Civil Engineers has established a new Airport Infrastructure Panel (AIP) to investigate how best to integrate airport infrastructure into existing transport networks.

The panel will consider how the UK’s aviation needs can be met while managing CO2 emissions, to ensure the sector makes a reasonable contribution to the Government’s reduction targets.

ICE director general Tom Foulkes said: “This new panel will work to ensure the ICE develops a coherent and robust policy on the future development of airport infrastructure in the UK.”

ROADS ‘NEED £2.5BN OF INVESTMENT’

Scotland’s deteriorating roads network could need as much as £2.5bn investment to bring it up to standard, a new report has found.

The Society of Chief Officers for Transportation in Scotland (SCOTS), a body representing council transport officers, has said the backlog had reached £1bn above the 2003 repairs bill estimate of around £1.5bn, after a new study.

Jim Valentine, the vice-chairman of the Society of Chief Officers for Transportation in Scotland, said: “You have got to concentrate on what you’ve got before you start on anything new.”

BT JOINS TRANSFORM SCOTLAND

One of the world’s leading providers of communications solutions joins Transform Scotland.

Transform Scotland has welcomed their newest membership organisation, BT Scotland, and highlighted the importance that information technology plays in delivering sustainable transport.

Paul Tetlaw, Chair of Transform Scotland, said: “In this context, BT Scotland are the ideal player and we look forward to working with them to demonstrate the benefits of IT systems.”

RAIL REPORT HIGHLIGHTS BENEFITS OF HIGH-SPEED PLANS

The development of a high-speed rail network across the UK must include Scotland from the outset, according to a report by the Scottish Parliament’s Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee.

The report highlights the likely economic, social and environmental benefits associated with the introduction of a high-speed rail service and calls on the Scottish Government to lobby the UK Government to ensure that Scottish interests are taken into account from the earliest planning stages of any network development.