

Share the car, share the costs

With prices at the petrol pumps making motoring an expensive way of getting around, Swindon Travel Choices promotes car sharing as a way to share the expense of motoring, whilst helping the environment and cutting congestion in the town.

Carshareswindon.com is an online resource to match up drivers and passengers who are heading the same way at the same time. There are over 2700 members already signed up, with scores of people looking for lifts or passengers to share journeys to and from Swindon, Bath, Bristol, Windmill Hill, Malmesbury, the Great Western Hospital and many more locations.

Elaine and Lee met through a carshare website and have been sharing the journey to the Great Western Hospital for the past year. "I was a bit hesitant at using an online system to search for a partner," says Elaine, "and it felt a bit like a dating site, where you choose your preferences. But I felt that I was safe sharing with someone in the same organisation, and it turned out really well as we get on great. Having started car sharing and reaping the benefits, I'd never go back to driving alone all the time."



There are various benefits that Elaine and Lee have found; cost saving being the main one. "I might work out what I'm saving and put it to one side to pay for something... I'm sure it will add up pretty quickly," says Lee.

"For me it's definitely the financial aspect," says Ian, part of a 4 strong car share team. "Each one of us is saving 65 miles a day when we don't drive, so that's 195 miles between us. That's about 1000 miles a week, 46,000 miles a year. That's twice around the world just from our one car share group!" Each car sharer saves £12 a day when they don't drive, which adds up to a whopping £2000 each year. "And that's just fuel," he continues. "It saves the wear and tear on the car, the depreciation value, my insurance is cheaper as there's less miles on the clock, and less things go wrong with the car as it has less use."

"I think it's great to be able to meet other people from the same organisation," says Elaine. "Normally our paths wouldn't have crossed, but it's turned into quite a sociable thing."

In North Swindon, Bob from Abbey Meads agrees. He shares with three other colleagues for a daily journey to Newbury. "For me the key benefit has to be the social aspect," he explains. "When we leave work we chat about a wide range of things on the journey home from cars to telly programmes and if you've had a stressful day at work, you can suddenly feel all that washing away. I think if you drive alone, there's a tendency to brood on things that have happened at work and have thoughts swirl around your head."

"My driving is safer with other people in the car," admits Martin, who is part of the Newbury car share. "I definitely drive slower and I'm conscious about driving carefully with passengers."

For Sandy, he feels his car share group stops him working far too many hours. "Not many companies tell you to go home," he says, "so when there are three other people depending on me to get home, it forces me to pack up. I think I'd spend much too long in the office otherwise as I lack self-discipline."



One theme came through from all the car sharers - it works better when the employer is actively encouraging it. At the Great Western Hospital, the car parking charges make car sharing more cost effective, and the employer provides emergency passes in case anybody gets stuck. The parking restrictions are also lifted at holiday time, when the pressure on spaces is less. In Newbury, the managers understand that people who car share can't stay late or have to leave meetings if they are dragging on.

"There are a few sacrifices that need to be made to make car sharing work," admits Sandy. "We had to agree to leave at the same time every morning, and to all leave work together at the end of the day. But that's good in a way, as I'm the sort of person that would keep on working otherwise."

So what advice would the car sharers give to people who think that car sharing isn't for them?

"I'd encourage people to give it a go, rather than think they can't, or dismiss the idea because of a preconceived idea that you have to give up your flexibility and freedom," says Sandy. "It helps when employers offer incentives to car share - such as special spaces, or restricting parking to non sharers, so it's worth asking your employer what they are doing."

"I'd say that you have to accept you need a bit of flexibility to make it work," says Ian, "but if you set out the boundaries from the start, it works well. The financial saving alone far outweighs any inconvenience for me. If my employer built a massive car park overnight and said that everyone can now have their own personal parking space, I wouldn't want it. I would still want to car share. It doesn't make sense not to."

At the Great Western Hospital, Elaine agrees. "I was really cynical to begin with and felt that we were being forced into it. Like many people I had a preconceived idea that it would be awkward and inconvenience me, but it's turned out to be easy, and we have fun."

You can check how many car sharers are going your way, and use the cost calculator at www.carshareswindon.com.