



One Million Miles

The Link Story (2015–2025)

Report by Community First
March 2026



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Contents

Link Schemes (P2-3)

Demographics (P4)

Future Implications (P5)

The Link Audit (P6)

Highlights (P6)

Impact of Covid-19 (P7)

Findings (P8-14)

The Link Story (P15)

Data sources and acknowledgements can be found on the back page.

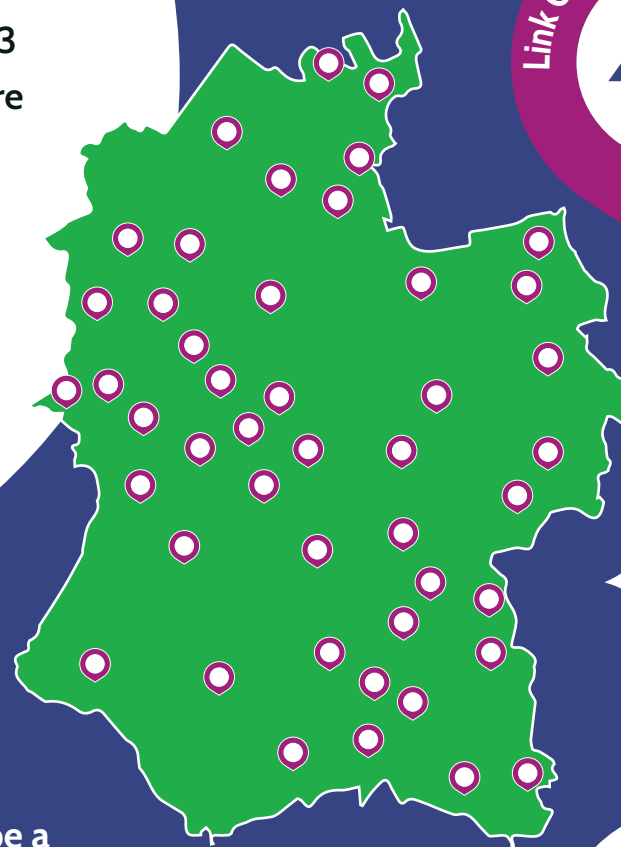


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Community First provides support to 43 Link (volunteer car) Schemes in Wiltshire and Swindon. Link Schemes are volunteer-led services which offer door-to-door transport for people who cannot access public transport or drive. This might be because they are older, frail or living with a disability or chronic health condition.

Most local Link Schemes are registered charities which cover a specific geographical area. This might be a town, district or a collection of villages. Each Link Scheme has a group of volunteer drivers (who use their own cars) as well as volunteer coordinators who answer telephone calls and match the request for help with an available volunteer.

Link Schemes



Local Link Schemes cover the following areas



Link Schemes in Wiltshire and Swindon

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Originally created as a pilot project in the village of Box in 1979, the Wiltshire and Swindon Link Network has grown to become one of the **largest and most successful** community transport schemes in the country.

Whilst many Link Schemes prioritise health-related journeys for the most vulnerable in their communities, some Link Schemes offer transport for shopping and social visits (e.g. lunch clubs) where capacity is available.

Link Schemes may also offer befriending, sitting to relieve a Carer and help with small tasks in the home or garden. This is known as a 'Good Neighbour' service.

Link offers a vital service in a large, rural county with a growing population of older residents, who are living longer with complex health needs and who may live some distance away from health care services.



Demographics - The Local Picture

Factors impacting current and future demand for community transport services locally include:

Ageing Population

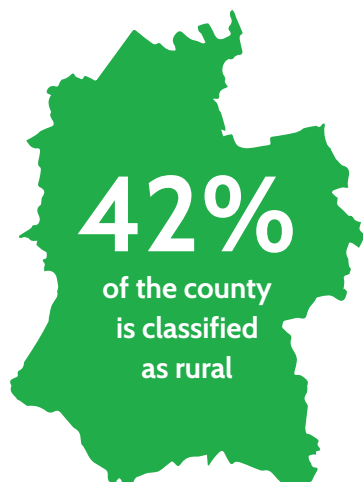
23% of residents are aged over 65 years and 6% are aged over 85. This demographic shift is accelerating. **By 2040, a third of Wiltshire residents are expected to be over 65** and the number of people aged over 85 is set to double.



Household Circumstances

13%

Of residents living in **one-person households** are aged 65 and over.



42%
of the county
is classified
as rural

Households in rural areas may face **additional barriers** to accessing local health services.

28,198

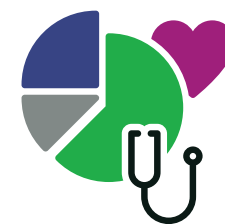
Of Wiltshire households (13%) have **no access to a car or van**, making them dependent on public transport, family members/friends, taxis or services offered by community transport groups.



Approximately **1 in 10 people are unpaid Carers**, with 2% providing 50 or more hours of unpaid care per week.

Health Needs

The prevalence of **chronic health conditions, with an ageing population**, is likely to increase demand for help with transport to medical appointments and other local services.



17%

Approx. Wiltshire residents **living with a disability**.

19,000

Approximate number of people **living with sight loss** in Wiltshire.



81% are aged 65 and over.

5,000

Approx number of people in Wiltshire **diagnosed with dementia** in 2023-2024.



60%

Of adults in the county are **overweight or obese** which may increase the risk of developing chronic health conditions over time.



Wiltshire has a higher-than-average level of **hypertension** (16.5%).



Other health issues in the community include **diabetes** (7.6%), **asthma** (7.5%) and **chronic kidney disease** (4.8%).

Chronic health conditions may require frequent, repeat visits to GP surgeries or hospitals and associated support with transport for those who cannot drive or are too unwell/frail to travel independently (including those who lack capacity).



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Future Implications for the Sector

These demographic, social and health-related factors indicate that demand for community transport services in Wiltshire is set to rise significantly over the coming decades.

An expanding older population is likely to increase demand on the sector, especially among residents with limited mobility and chronic health conditions. At the same time, a combination of rurality and household circumstances such as living alone, lack of access to a private vehicle and caring responsibilities may further contribute to isolation and transport inequality.

As the prevalence of long-term health conditions grows, so too will the need for reliable, accessible transport to medical appointments and essential local services. Link Schemes are likely to face sustained and increasing pressure to meet these needs, highlighting the importance of strategic planning, investment, volunteer recruitment and coordination across the sector to ensure services remain resilient and sustainable for the future.



1/3

of Wiltshire residents will be over 65 by 2040

42%

of the county is classified as rural



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The Link Audit

Community First receives funding from Wiltshire Council to support local Link Schemes and Community Minibus Groups. This includes advice and guidance, DBS checks, advocacy and grant funding.

Each year, Community First carries out a county wide audit of Link Scheme activity. This includes specific metrics such as number of volunteers, miles travelled, tasks undertaken and hours offered by volunteers. The Link Audit provides an overview of volunteer activity throughout the county (and by geographical area, North, South, East and West Wiltshire) as well as its associated economic impact.

The Link Audit offers valuable insight into the community transport sector locally, with consistent data gathered over time. Thanks to this data we have been able to explore the Link Story from 2015-2025, offering new insights into the extraordinary achievements of these volunteer-led transport services over the last decade.

The Link Story is one of resilience, optimism and adaptability, especially during a global pandemic and turbulent period of social and economic recovery. Link Schemes have gone further than ever before and with fewer volunteers, to offer support and keep communities connected to vital services including healthcare. Their strong commitment to supporting local communities and rebuilding operational capacity during a challenging time should be commended.

Link Schemes (2015-2025) – Highlights

The highlight figures below represent the totals between 2015–2025 (data collected via the Link Audit).



9,025,273

Total miles
travelled by
Link volunteers
between 2015-2025



483,121

Total number of
**everyday tasks in
the home or garden**
completed by Link volunteers.



1,357,955



Total number of **hours**
given by Link Scheme
volunteers between
2015-2025

£17.3m

Total **economic value**
of Link Schemes
based on ONS average
hourly wage (adjusted
by year).



319,403

Total **health
related journeys**
carried out by Link
volunteers between
2015-2025



The Impact of Covid-19 on Wiltshire and Swindon Link Schemes

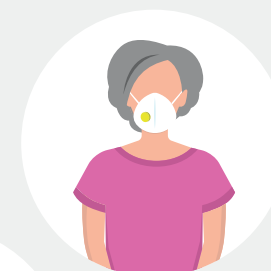


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	2019	2020	% Change
 Number of volunteers	1,624	1,432	-12%
 Miles travelled	831,450	418,461	-50%
 Average miles travelled per volunteer	460	292	-37%
 Number of tasks completed	48,027	23,107	-52%
 Hours offered by volunteers	138,638	78,396	-43%

Covid-19 had a significant impact on the operational capacity of Link Schemes due to lockdowns, shielding and fewer face-to-face medical appointments. Some volunteers (particularly those who were older or who were medically vulnerable) were unable to be involved in volunteering activity during this time. Across all of the recorded audit metrics, there was an average reduction of 39% between 2019 and 2020. This suggests Link operational capacity was reduced by approximately 40% during the earliest stages of the pandemic.

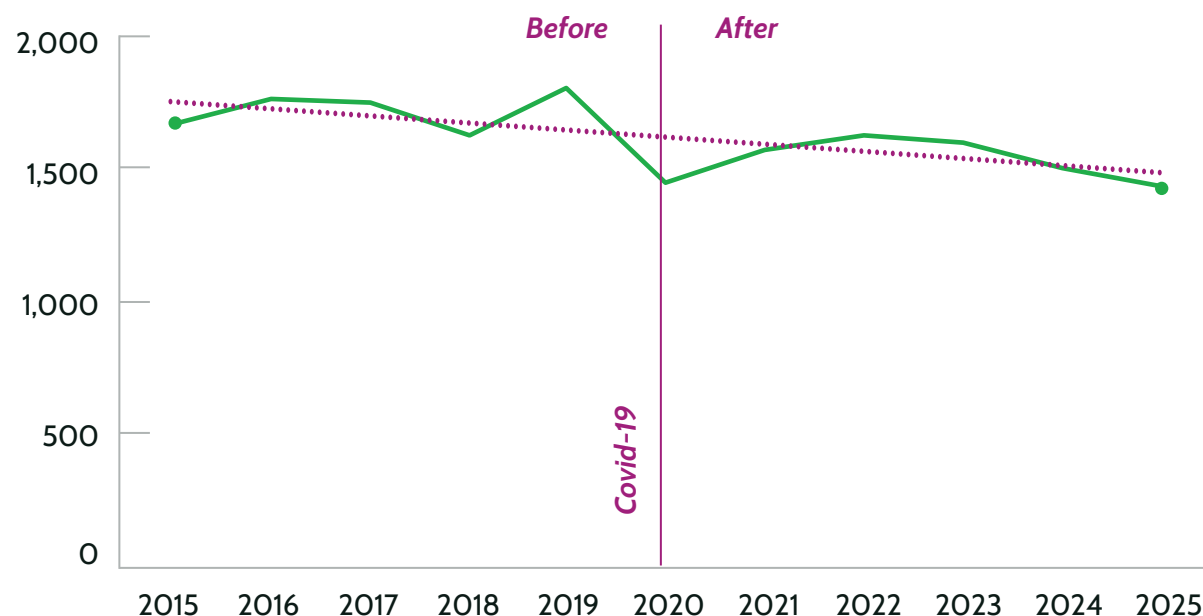
As well as the middle point of the decade, Covid-19 is an important part of the Link story and 2020 is a clear 'before and after' marker for our analysis.



Link Volunteers



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Total number of Link Volunteers

The number of volunteers involved with Link Schemes has trended downward over time, from a peak of 1,807 volunteers in 2019.

Volunteer numbers dropped significantly during Covid-19 and have not recovered to the levels seen before the pandemic. Indeed, 2025 saw the lowest number of volunteers involved with Link Schemes at any point during the last decade (1,422), with an average of 33 volunteers per Link Scheme in 2025.

Despite this, all other recorded metrics have trended upward over time, suggesting Link Schemes are more productive than ever.

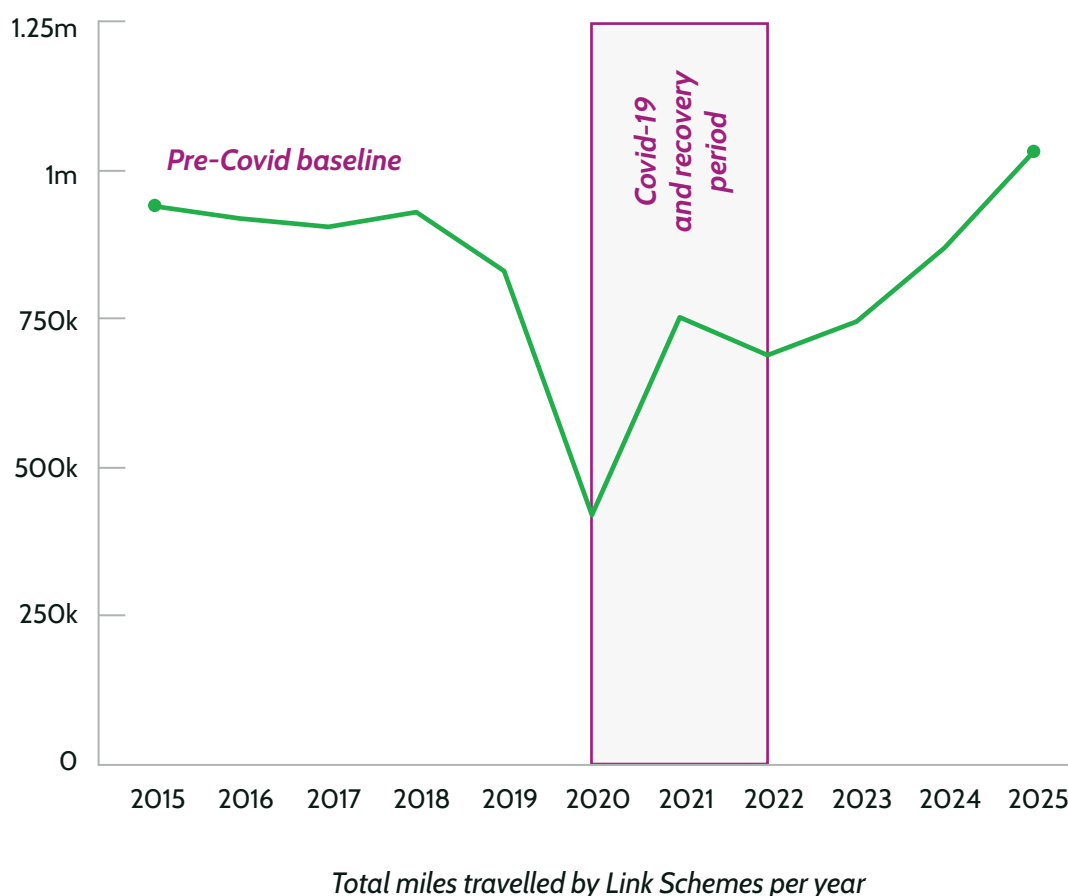
Volunteer Productivity	2015	2025	% Change
Miles travelled	567	723	+26%
Number of tasks completed	32	39	+22%
Hours offered	82	112	+36%
Economic value	£868.39*	£2,088.65**	+140%

*Based on ONS South West Average Hourly pay - Gross (£) - For all employee jobs @ £10.58 per hour

**The median hourly rate (excluding overtime) for a full-time employee in the South West region of the UK was £18.60 in April 2025.

One Million Miles

2025 represented an important milestone for Link, with volunteers travelling a total of 1,027,780 miles, exceeding a million miles for the first time since we began recording audit data. This is an especially impressive achievement considering the period of recovery following the pandemic and fewer volunteers overall.



In the earlier part of the decade, Link Schemes were travelling approximately 900,000 miles a year. This was an average of 528 miles per year, per volunteer. There was a period of exponential growth in miles travelled between 2022-2025 which suggests a steady recovery following the pandemic and the lifting of restrictions. This overall increase in mileage may also reflect changes in how NHS care is delivered and prioritised, with more people being referred to specialist services e.g. cancer treatment at district hospitals in Bath, Bristol, Swindon and Salisbury (or to specialist centres further afield). These hospitals are typically further away from rural communities.

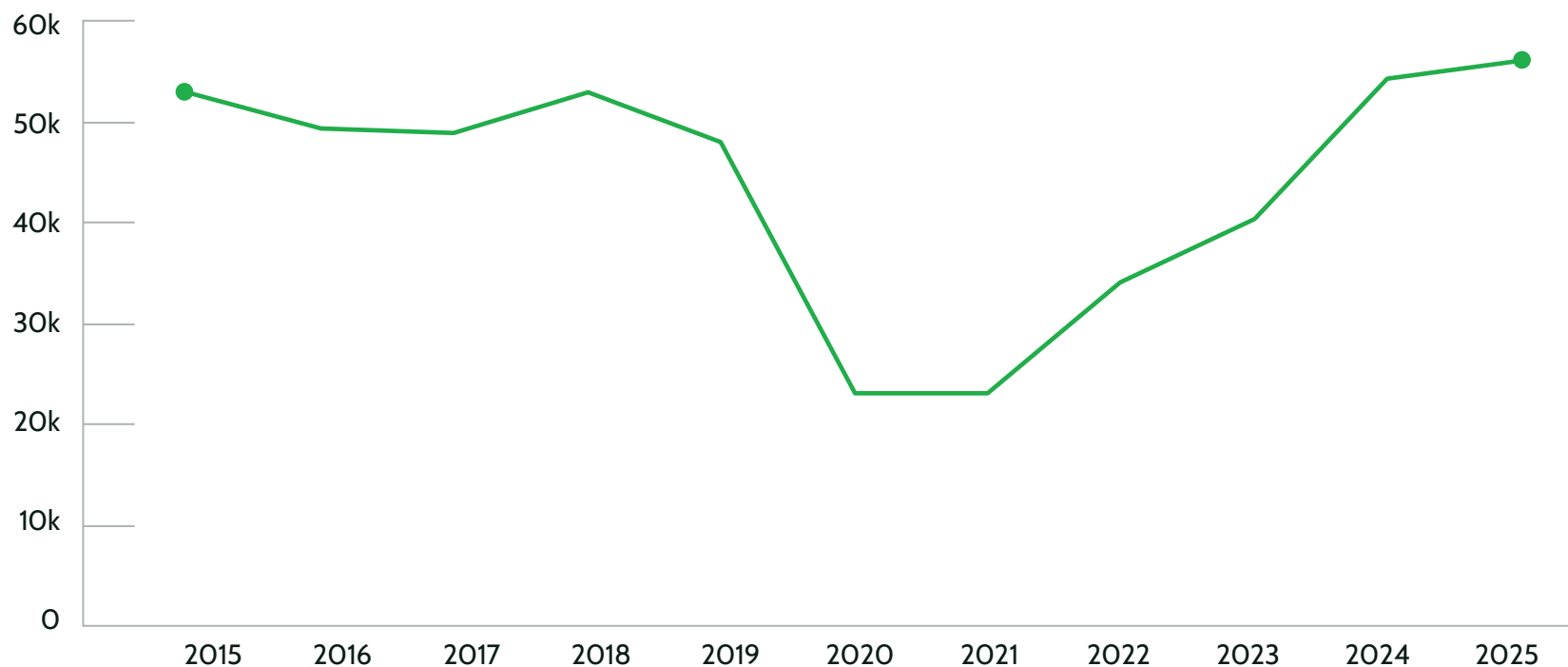
Between 2015-2025 the average number of yearly miles travelled by each Link volunteer driver increased by 26%, with 2025 seeing the highest ever average number of miles travelled per volunteer (723). Fewer volunteers are travelling further than ever before.

General trends in the sector which could have contributed to increased volunteer productivity include the adoption of digital scheduling software (replacing manual paper-based booking), the use of GPS and routing apps for more efficient travel and the shift toward virtual/telephone appointments for simple consultations, allowing volunteers to focus on trips for essential face-to-face medical trips at district or community hospitals. This may also account for the reduction in GP appointment trips between 2015-2025 (see Health Related Journeys.)

Help with Everyday Tasks



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Total tasks completed by Link Scheme volunteers

In addition to transport, some Link schemes offer help with small tasks in the home or garden. This might include shopping, prescription collection, sitting to relieve a Carer or befriending for people who are isolated.

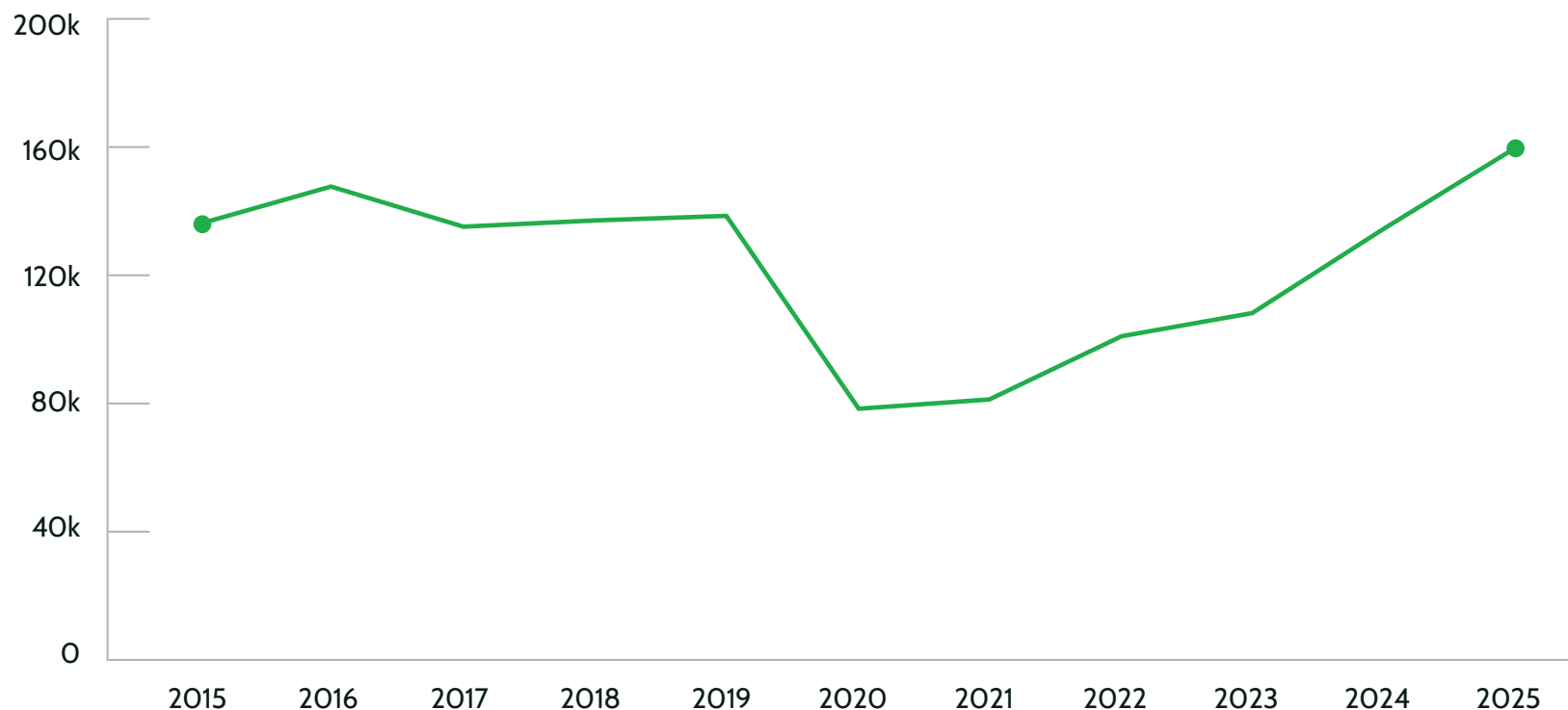
Over the last decade, Link volunteers carried out an average of 43,920 tasks a year (although the pre and post-Covid baseline is closer to 50,000 tasks on average per year). This is an average of 27 tasks per volunteer, per year or 2.25 tasks per month. Between 2015-2025, the overall number of tasks completed increased by 5% and by 22% per volunteer, per year.

2025 saw the highest number of tasks completed (55,992) at any point in the last decade, with an average of 39 tasks per volunteer, per year.

Hours Offered by Link Schemes



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Total hours offered by Link Scheme volunteers

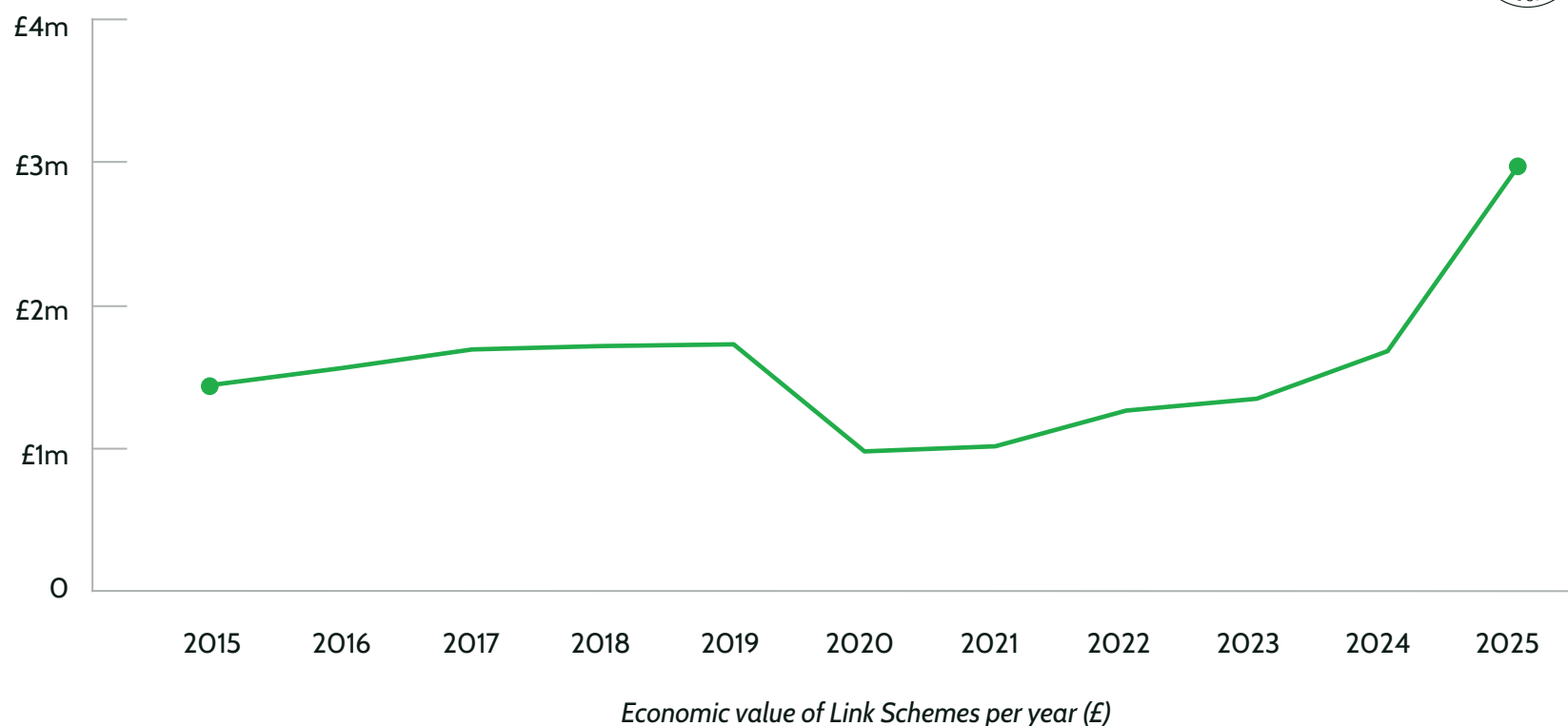
Collectively, Link volunteers offered on average 123,450 hours of their time per year between 2015-2025. The average baseline pre-Covid was approximately 138,000, with a post-Covid baseline of 134,000. This, combined with fewer volunteers overall, also suggests increased productivity amongst current Link volunteers. Indeed, between 2015-2025, the overall number of hours offered by Link volunteers increased by 17%.

Over the same period, the average individual Link volunteer offered 77 hours of their time per year. This has risen from a baseline average of 81 hours per year before the pandemic to an average of 90 hours per year after the pandemic. This further suggests a smaller group of volunteers are giving more of their time to Link. In 2025, each volunteer gave an average of 112 hours per year, or 9.3 hours per month (2.3 hours a week), which is a 36% increase from 2015.

Economic Value of Link Schemes



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There has been a significant increase in the economic value of Link Schemes over the last decade. This is mostly due to increases in the ONS South West average pay for all employee jobs which is the figure used to calculate economic value (based on the equivalent pay for all volunteer hours offered per year). In 2015, the pay rate was £10.58, rising to £18.60 in 2025.

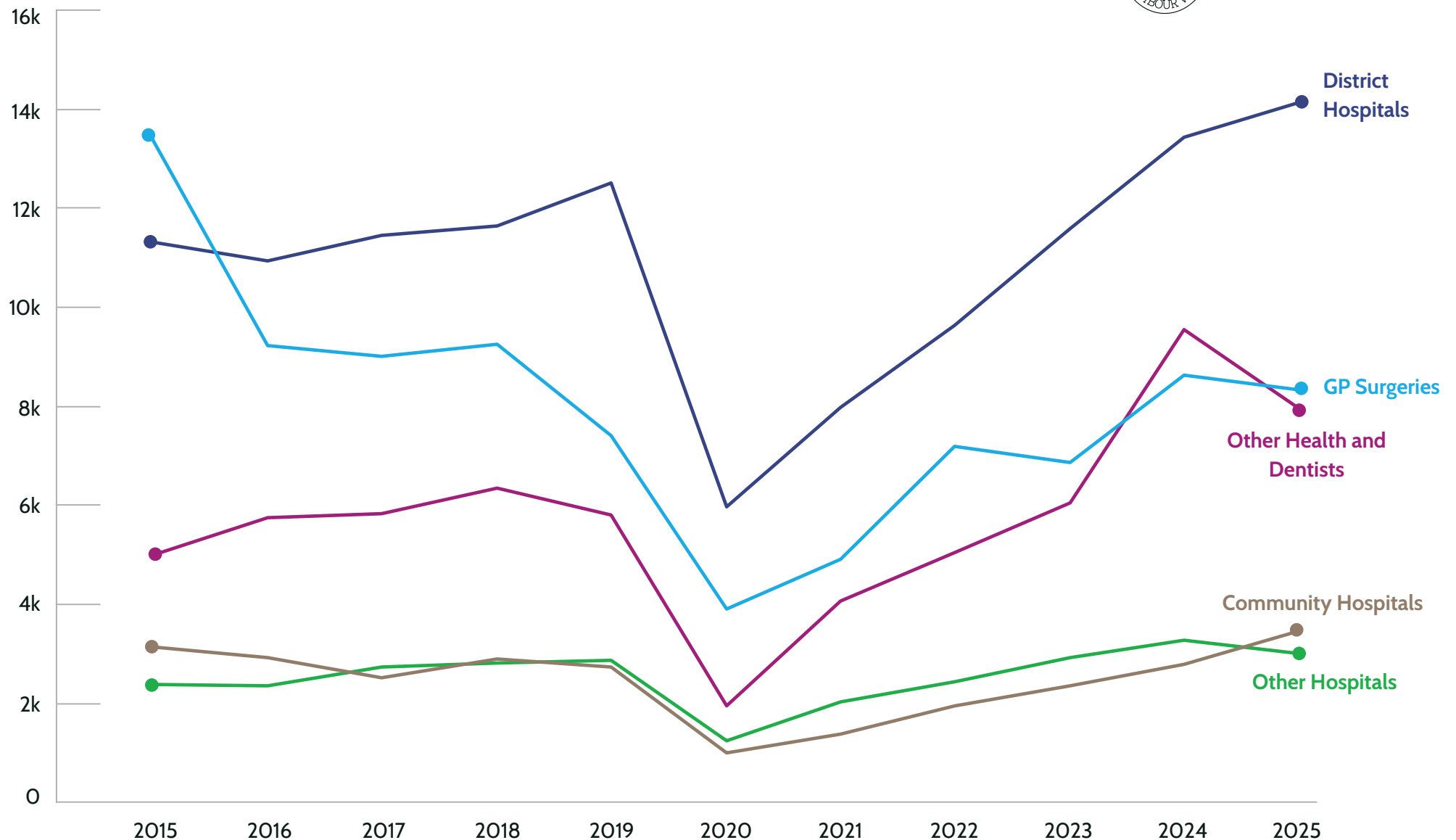
In 2015, the economic value of Link Schemes was £1.4m, this has increased to £2.9m in 2025 which is an overall increase of 106%. The average economic value per volunteer in 2015 was £868.39, rising to £2,088.65 in 2025 which is an average increase of 140% for each Link volunteer.

The costs associated with providing Link services have also increased in recent years due to cost of living challenges and inflation impacting the price of fuel and other expenditure.

Health Related Journeys



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Total health related journeys by type, per year



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Health Related Journeys

On average, Link volunteers carried out 29,037 health related journeys each year between 2015-2025, with a baseline figure of approximately 32,000 per year before and after Covid-19. Overall, health related journeys increased by 4% over the period, however, there were significant changes in frequency over time based on the type of health-related journey.

There was a 25% increase in visits to district hospitals (Great Western Hospital Swindon, Royal United Hospital Bath and Salisbury Hospital) between 2015-2025 and a 59% increase in other health and dental visits. All other health-related journey types saw a decrease overall, which included community hospitals (-10%), other hospitals such as private or specialist hospitals (-25%) and GP surgeries (-38%). Reasons for this could include increased digital/virtual consultations and changes to the way health care services are delivered and prioritised.

Whilst there was a modest rise in health-related journeys between 2015-2025, the pattern of health-related journeys has changed over time. Volunteer drivers are undertaking fewer short journeys to local GP surgeries (declining from 13,419 in 2015 to 8,327 in 2025) and are instead making more trips to district hospitals (increasing from 11,314 in 2015 to 14,143 in 2025). District and specialist hospitals are located further away from rural communities and journeys to these hospitals typically involves travelling much further afield. This could help to explain why total mileage increased in 2025, despite the modest rise in health-related journeys overall.



36,895

health related journeys were carried out in 2025

25%

increase in journeys to district hospitals between 2015-2025



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The Link Story (2015-2025)

The decade between 2015 and 2025 is a story of resilience, optimism and adaptability for the network of 43 Link Schemes in Wiltshire and Swindon. Despite the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (which initially reduced operational capacity by 40%), Link Schemes have successfully rebuilt their operational capacity to meet the needs of their communities. Local Link Schemes are travelling further and doing more with fewer volunteers. Ongoing support will be needed to ensure services remain resilient and sustainable for the future. This is especially important with a growing, aging population who are living longer and with more complex health conditions.

The defining characteristic of this period is a large increase in volunteer productivity. Although the total number of volunteers fell to a decade low of 1,422 by 2025, Link Schemes reached a historic milestone during that year by exceeding one million miles travelled for the first time. This achievement was made possible by Link volunteers who, on average, are now offering 36% more hours and completing 22% more tasks than they did in 2015.

As Wiltshire's demographic shift accelerates (with the number of people aged 85 and over set to double by 2040) the service offered by Link Schemes will continue to be in high demand. By 2025, the economic value of Link reached £2.9 million, a 106% increase since 2015. This highlights the vital role Link schemes play in bridging the gap between vulnerable residents and essential healthcare services locally.



Ongoing support will be needed to ensure services remain resilient and sustainable for the future. This is especially important with a growing, aging population who are living longer and with more complex health conditions.

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The Link Story (2015-2025)



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Acknowledgements

Thank you to the volunteers of the 43 Link Schemes in Wiltshire and Swindon who give so generously of their time to support vulnerable and isolated residents across the county. Thanks also to the volunteers involved in supporting the Link Audit each year, this report and these insights would not be possible without their efforts. Special thanks go to John FitzGerald (Chair of Mere and District Link Scheme) who kindly agreed to review and comment on the draft report. We are grateful to Wiltshire Council and Bath and North East Somerset, Swindon and Wiltshire Integrated Care Board (BSW ICB) for continuing to provide vital funding to support the delivery of local Link Schemes.

Data Sources

Wiltshire Intelligence JSNA Population Summary

Wiltshire Intelligence Health and Disease

Wiltshire Intelligence Healthy Ageing Needs Assessment

Wiltshire Intelligence Older People

Wiltshire Intelligence JSNA 2025

Link Audit data (2015-2025) collected by Link Schemes and compiled by Community First

ONS average hourly wage data for the South West

Community First
Unit C2, Beacon Business Centre
Hopton Park, Devizes
SN10 2EY

enquiries@communityfirst.org.uk
www.communityfirst.org.uk