

# Statement in response to the Bus Service Improvement Plan / Enhanced Partnership consultation for North Yorkshire County Council

*Prepared by members of HarBus, the bus user forum for Hambleton and Richmondshire*

## INTRODUCTION

1. This response document has been prepared by the membership of HarBus, the bus user forum for Hambleton and Richmondshire. HarBus operates in tandem with the Rural Transport & Access Partnership (RTAP) for the same area, involving the voluntary sector, public authorities, health agencies, service users, transport providers and community representatives.
2. In July 2021 HarBus responded to the Council's earlier consultation on their Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) with our recommendations for an improved bus network in our area, to reflect the Government's policy to secure a step change in bus service provision: *a copy is attached for reference.*

## BUS NETWORK, SERVICES & CONNECTIVITY

3. As the local bus users' group, HarBus are very supportive of North Yorkshire County Council's vision for bus services in the area, to include an efficient and optimised bus network that meets the needs of our local communities and enables sustainable, cleaner and healthier travel choices, resulting in fewer car journeys. This would be greatly beneficial to Hambleton and Richmondshire.
4. We are however very concerned that the BSIP is focussed almost entirely on developing commercial bus services within the more urban districts of Harrogate, Selby and Scarborough, described as the three main bus markets in the county. The plan contains little prospect of any improvement to the miserable level of many services in our area, despite a stated aim of the National Bus Strategy to reverse the decline in bus services which has taken place in recent years. Our recommendations last July appear to have been totally ignored.
5. Whilst we welcome the Council's intention to maintain the current expenditure of £1.5m per annum supporting bus services, we have to remember that this budget has been reduced from around £6m ten years ago – a drop of 75%: this has resulted in a serious drop in bus services and usage, particularly in the more rural districts. According to the Department for Transport (DfT) North Yorkshire compares very unfavourably with other rural counties in their local bus journey statistics: thus between 2008/9 and 2018/19 North Yorkshire passenger trips declined by 28.2%, compared to 21.63% in Cumbria: 21.1% in Lincolnshire, and 6.65% in Devon: in Norfolk passenger trips grew by 3.09%!
6. The BSIP does not include any plans to restore this patronage or restore any of the lost bus services, nor to change the policy of not supporting services on evenings and

Sundays. With the current increases in bus operating costs and reduced patronage due to the coronavirus epidemic, we envisage the BSIP presiding over a further contraction in rural services as they become uneconomic and unaffordable under Council policies. This would be completely contrary to the Government's policy and the Council's own vision. The latter contains higher targets for passenger growth outside of the main urban areas than for Harrogate and Scarborough. We suspect there may be some miscalculations in the figures, which exceed the headline figures of 3% and 1.5% quoted in the text (in Selby's case by a factor of 10). Either way there are no firm proposals to achieve this growth.

7. The BSIP highlights that North Yorkshire is one of England's most popular tourist destinations, with two national parks, presenting an area of opportunity for development of the bus network. However, there are no proposals to improve the limited service offering in the national parks. The majority of Sunday and Bank Holiday buses in each area are dependent on fundraising by the Moorsbus and Dales and Bowland community interest companies, which is not a sustainable basis for these important services. It appears that the BSIP will do little to help support these services, except possibly with some marketing activity. This will, however, be of little benefit if there is not a good network of buses with sufficient capacity for people to use. The climate emergency means that modal shift to public transport is becoming increasingly urgent in all areas, including our own, but the BSIP will not help facilitate this.
8. We are also concerned that the BSIP makes no mention of the needs of different areas, nor any methodology for evaluating these needs. We are aware of the County's past refusal to undertake Needs Assessments, and we are wondering how current proposals for improvement are being justified. How, for example, was the trial area for the YorBus operation selected (see below)?

## ENHANCED PARTNERSHIP

9. HarBus welcomes the Council's decision to work with bus operators in a Partnership, but we cannot see how this will be achieved if only three bus operators are invited to serve on the Board and in the Performance Group. That leaves the majority of operators outside of the "club", including we suspect all the operators in our area with one possible exception. The more rural districts are effectively discriminated against as they lack larger commercial operators to bring forward proposals.
10. The Council's view that operators will need to appoint representatives between them to engage with the Partnership appears to us to be unrealistic in the current competitive environment where most information is classified as confidential. We believe that, to be effective, the partnership should be widened to include all the operators who wish to participate.
11. The focus on infrastructure by the Partnership disadvantages the more rural areas, as these do not require expensive capital interventions to improve the quality and usage of bus services: they require revenue spend on service provision. This is

particularly relevant to the first Scheme of the Enhanced Partnership, which is entirely focussed on infrastructure.

12. We notice that the Partnership Board will have a *“local area bus user representative”* – this is welcome, but we see that the role has already been assigned to a national organisation, Transport Focus. We wonder how far they can really represent local users.
13. We also notice that the BSIP states *“Through the development of the BSIP, NYCC has worked closely with the operators to begin developing a draft information strategy”* – it is disappointing that the Council has not sought the views of user representatives such as HarBus and other stakeholders such as RTAP. When will this be rectified?

## JOINT WORKING

14. Whilst on the subject of partnerships, you will be aware that the DfT are encouraging the development of a "Total Transport" approach with local authorities working jointly with the Health Sector, particularly in the provision of non-emergency patient transport, so that the combined provision could achieve a greater level of service without additional net expenditure - indeed savings could be made. We cannot find any reference to this in the BSIP: we would urge the Council to address this omission.

## YORBUS

15. Whilst HarBus believes that an improved network of scheduled bus services is essential for our area, we welcome the Council's consideration of demand responsive transport (DRT) as an option in some areas, provided the bus network is retained and developed, with the DRT service feeding into this network. However, we have a number of concerns about the Council's current trial DRT service, YorBus, and hope that a full and transparent review will be taken of this, involving all stakeholders in areas being considered for the extended operation, before it is rolled out further. The Council's claims of high passenger satisfaction appear to be based almost exclusively on asking passengers after completion of their journeys, without any questioning of those who were unable to book a journey: we are getting only half the picture!
16. We have been concerned about lack of clarity over the operation of YorBus, and of conflicting responses to our inquiries, and in particular the Council's refusal to accept advanced bookings, which are essential for potential passengers to have confidence in the system: this has prompted us to make our own investigations about advanced bookings. We have found that whilst one of the leading DRT software companies advises that the use of Uber-style "on-demand" software (such as VIA) would reduce patronage (in direct contrast to the assertion by council officers) a properly designed DRT booking/scheduling package would have the opposite effect. In Lincolnshire we understand that 83-85% of bookings on their DRT system are made in advance of the day. We would urge the Council to explore this matter further: we can provide further information if you wish.

17. We are pleased to learn that the Council is now adding virtual bus stops to the network to improve the accessibility of the service. However, we believe that DRT should have the ability to operate on a door-to-door basis within the defined operating area, as is in the case for most DRT schemes elsewhere in the country. This would particularly benefit the elderly and/or disabled passengers who may be unable to access bus stops in any form, particularly due to the distances involved and scarcity of safe pedestrian routes.
18. We would add that the very attractive fare charged on YorBus strikes us as unsustainable in the future, bearing in mind the Council's very unwelcome decision to raise bus fares on all other routes, which is likely to jeopardise the recovery of patronage after the pandemic. It would be useful to know the extent to which this low fare has artificially inflated usage figures. We question how long can this fare level can be sustained, and what fares will be charged on any extended system. We are also unclear how the extended system would be procured, and whether it would be put out to tender, as all this will affect the level of service which can be afforded.

## CONCLUSION

1. HarBus welcomes Council's vision to improve public transport in North Yorkshire but is disappointed by the lack of proposals to achieve this. This is a missed opportunity to recognise that a good public transport network across the whole county, and over its borders into neighbouring counties, is a means of creating a safer and healthier society. Regular and reliable bus services seven days a week, eighteen hours a day would help to combat climate change as residents and visitors can leave the car behind to access rail services, employment, leisure, retail, education, medical, business and family, thus reducing carbon emissions and creating a cleaner, safer, more friendly environment.
2. Instead of costly road and modest transport infrastructure improvements, HarBus members would like to see the Council investing in developing a county-wide bus network that provides a reliable, regular, daily bus service for every community in the county, be it a village, urban or suburban community. We recognise that significant costs would be involved in developing such a network but we believe that the cost of not doing so would be even greater if the true costs of fuel poverty, social isolation and exclusion from activities and opportunities, as well as the harm to done to our health and the environment by carbon emissions and climate change, are taken into account. Whilst we recognise the advantages of modern technology that enables us live remotely online, we strongly believe that to consistently live like this due to necessity rather than choice is causing irreparable damage to both physical and mental health.
3. Therefore, HarBus calls on NYCC to go beyond the BSIP and develop a public transport network that enhances the quality of life both for all its residents and for all visitors to this wonderful county.