

## **Written evidence submitted by York Bus Forum (BUS0009)**

1. We welcome the Committee's decision to hold an Inquiry into the National Bus Strategy (NBS) and are pleased for the opportunity to submit evidence. We are submitting evidence because we have serious concerns about the ability of Local Transport Authorities (LTAs) to meet the requirements of the NBS within the government's timescales and within the financial envelope.

### **York Bus Forum**

2. York Bus Forum is an independent voluntary organisation, open to all <sup>1</sup> It was formed in 2016 when the City of York Council (CYC) - the LTA - were trying to cut evening and Sunday bus services. Eventually we were able to reduce the number of cuts. We are now an established stakeholder on transport issues in the city that is widely listened to. We have a good working relationship with senior councillors and the Council's Sustainable Transport Team (STT), as well as the major bus operators, York Civic Trust, York Disabled Rights Forum, Age Friendly York Citizens Group, York Older People's Assembly and York Environment Forum.

3. We have regular meetings with the main political groups of councillors and have active members from the major parties. Several Parish Councils and transport user groups are also affiliated to the Forum. We have raised issues relating to temporary bus stops, bus stop infrastructure, potential re-routeing of services, cuts in evening services, withdrawal of Sunday services and faulty display screens. We have also sought information on the bus operators' plans for introducing audible and visible announcements.

4. We are currently undertaking a membership campaign which includes a poster and electronic display campaign on all First York services to publicise the Forum and to promote bus services generally. We are also working with councillors to put our poster on Ward noticeboards and to secure a special sustainable transport edition of the city's newsletter 'Our City'<sup>2</sup>.

5. We worked with the STT to produce York's Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) <sup>3</sup> and many of our proposals are reflected in the document. We also expect to provide a key user input to the forthcoming Enhanced Partnership (EP), although we are very concerned about the delay in being able to finalise the EP and the lack of clarity on CYC consultation plans.

### **York's Bus Network**

6. The York network is described in its BSIP. First York (FY) is the principal local service operator and also runs 6 park and ride (P & R) services (one currently suspended) under contract to the council and services to and from the University of York which are also available to the general public. The P&R services are a significant part of the FY operation, forming about a third of their fleet. They provide one of the most frequent services in the city using modern, mainly electric buses with audible and visual (AV) next stop displays and enclosed waiting areas; this clearly results in some abstraction from local services. Moreover, because the P&R and University routes are such a significant part of the FY operation, there is a tendency for them to dominate both the company and CYC thinking. Yet the FY local services – which are currently operated with much older diesel buses without AV displays and serve a much larger area of the city – have to rely on city centre stops with inadequate or outdated shelters and account for the most representations we receive from users. **Update: 26 March 2022 – Zebra grant for 44 electric buses awarded – see 9d below.**

7. The city is also served by a number of different operators: Transdev Coastliner, Arriva, East Yorkshire, Connexions, Reliance and York Pullman. Most of these services are run commercially, but several of the local routes rely on support from the council. Some of the outer areas of the city are reliant on services funded by North Yorkshire or East Yorkshire and these generally have a much lower frequency service with few or no evening journeys. The range of operators and the mix of commercial and supported services leads to complications when services are being re-tendered – usually at 3 yearly intervals – and makes service planning complex and time consuming. CYC decided not to choose franchising – in part influenced by the very tight timetable for making a decision on this. **Had they decided to opt for franchising, the planning of the network and the changes needed to meet the expansion of the city and to serve new developments would have potentially been much easier.**

### **Our Evidence**

8. The Committee sought evidence on each of the following aspects:

a) challenges facing the sector as it recovers from the pandemic and the effectiveness of steps taken by both Government and stakeholders in response;

- b) progress against the ambitions and targets set out in national bus strategy (NBS) including the effectiveness, pace and priority of the strategy's implementation;
- c) innovation in the sector, including examples of new methods that have been trialled successfully;
- d) bus funding over the short and long term; and
- e) decarbonisation of the sector and modal shift from other forms of transport.

9. Taking each of these in turn:

a) Bus patronage fell because of the pandemic. Whilst it has recovered to some extent, the number of older people and particularly concessionary pass holders using the bus has shown much slower growth. The government's 'Covid funding' payments to operators to compensate them for the lower number of passengers carried were due to end in March 2022, leading to concerns of potential service cuts. At a late stage, additional funding of £150 million was provided to cover the period to October 2022, after which no further payments are to be made<sup>4</sup>. We have not so far been able to find out how this funding will be distributed and so we are unable to say what will be the effect on services in York. **However, it appears unlikely that this sum spread across all operators in England will be enough to stave off cuts in many areas unless there is a significant rise in bus use.**

A further concern is the planned reduction in government support for concessionary pass travel. This is now going to be reduced to reflect the current lower level of travel under a formula prescribed by DfT. **This will place LTAs in a very difficult position as they will be obliged to continue to allow unlimited free travel for pass holders, but the compensation received will be insufficient as travel increases.**

A key issue affecting older and vulnerable groups' decisions on whether to return to using the bus is COVID transmission – which flags both issues about bus designs & ventilation. The need for ventilation creates problems on longer journeys – such as the Coastliner 840 service from York across the moors to Whitby; once the buses get up speed it's very uncomfortable to have all the windows open. **There is a need for trusted independent evidence on transmission risks on buses.** The Government needs to provide reassurance (evidentially based or via some trusted third party) to encourage a return to the bus. **It is very important to undo the damage caused by the Government's original messages to avoid public transport and we have urged**

**CYC and bus operators to launch a promotional campaign aimed at concessionary pass holders, as well as a general marketing campaign.**

Other factors are reducing the numbers of people using buses – especially working from home. A recent study published by West Yorkshire Combined Authority <sup>5</sup> shows that residents travel to work 3.1 days a week on average, a figure 28% lower than before COVID-19, when it was 4.4 days a week. Although certain recovery of trips to work is anticipated in the long term, it is unlikely that it will do so to pre-pandemic levels.

b) We welcome the ambitious vision of the NBS to dramatically improve bus services in England outside London through greater local leadership, to reverse the recent shift in journeys away from public transport and encourage passengers back to bus. However, it is clear that this vision and the requirements set out in the document are not conducive to bringing about the aims of the NBS-

The government's timetable for the first BSIPs placed LTAs under great pressure and, disappointingly, the assessment of these by the Department of Transport (DfT) and the Treasury (with the resulting dialogue with LTAs) is taking much longer than anticipated. Moreover, it is now clear that the reduced funding of £1.4bn<sup>6</sup> will be grossly inadequate to meet the aspirations of all 79 LTAs, with a £5bn funding gap anticipated <sup>7</sup>. This has led to detailed scrutiny and a ranking of bids, with the result that any funding offered to successful LTAs seems likely to be spread over several years, while others may receive the minimum or nothing! **The delay and likely changes to BSIPs have had a knock-on impact on the production of EPs – as instanced above for York – and could result in formal consultation arrangements being compressed or reduced, contrary to the NBS requirements.**

It seems to us that the government on the one hand is talking about greater local leadership but on the other hand is not allowing or trusting local leadership to take the delegated action to bring about the changes needed to promote and transform services in their local areas. **In our view, those resources that are available should be delegated to local leadership to prioritise as they, in partnership with local bus operators and passenger groups agree as priorities, rather than the priorities set by Whitehall.**

c) Contactless travel is now offered on all York services and this has speeded up boarding times. A Transdev initiative of £1 fares after 7pm – which they extended for an extra 6 months – has been a success. According to the Transdev website<sup>8</sup>: “It's clearly helping to attract more people to return to the bus.” FY are currently offering a ticket which allows 5 people to travel together

anywhere on their York network for the day after 0900 Monday to Friday for just £9 using their App. Cheaper tickets are offered to young people under 18 and during the summer and school holidays, special family tickets are often offered.

York and its operators have proved much less willing to experiment with the new forms of service which might help fill the gaps in service in outer communities and in the evenings and weekends. Demand-responsive services have proved successful elsewhere in attracting new patronage but require significant revenue support during their promotional phase. There is a lack of well-documented evidence on the relative merits of alternative design options. **The Government could support innovation by supporting and disseminating an evidence base on the performance of different innovative approaches (which would in turn provide the evidence which the Committee now seeks) and provide revenue funding to support the early stages of innovative services.**

d) The bus funding offered through the NBS is principally through BSIPs, which is clearly now under great strain due to the inadequacy of the total funds on offer (as described at b above). The government has also offered the possibility of funding for new, electric buses through its Zero Emission Bus Regional Areas scheme (Zebra)<sup>9</sup>. On 26<sup>th</sup> March the successful outcome to the York Zebra bid for £8.4m was announced, with FY contributing a further £10m toward the cost of the 44 new electric buses<sup>10</sup>. Whilst this still leaves York's remaining BSIP "asks" at over £38m, **it is clearly worth LTAs seeking significant capital contributions from bus operators towards overall BSIP aims.**

**However, if the Government is serious in its aims to improve bus services, it needs to accept that revenue funding is usually more cost-effective than capital expenditure in enhancing service provision<sup>11</sup>; given that, it needs urgently to address the shortfall in revenue funding.**

**Where the Government is seeking proposals for the allocation of its funds, whether capital or revenue, it is essential that it abides by the sums which it has initially indicated will be available. To impose a major cut late in the bidding process, as has happened with the BSIP, is a serious waste of scarce LTA and civil service resources, and engenders mistrust and loss of morale at a time when central and local government should be working together to enhance sustainable travel.**

The short term outlook for bus services is dire. It is now becoming clear that such BSIP funds as are awarded are likely to be spread over up to 3 years, thus

failing to provide the kick-start needed to reverse the downward trend in service provision and hindering the progress sought by the NBS. If things improve in the longer term, it is likely to be too little, too late to rescue the gaps in current networks.

The Committee will be aware that there are several other (non- NBS) potential funding sources for LTAs – especially for Combined Authorities with their devolved funding settlements. Levelling Up<sup>12</sup> – with its stated mission to bring public transport up to London standards – would appear to offer the best longer term funding opportunity for some areas, although with limited scope for York. But, as was needed for Zebra, each of these requires dedicated work by officers –at a time when authorities’ resources are squeezed! Bids also need the necessary transport planning skills to produce them. In York’s case the sustainable transport team is very small and has only three officers dealing with bus issues – one of whom also has responsibility for cycling, walking and disabled access in the city. It is clear that if the government’s objectives on NBS are to be met, LTAs must be provided with the resources to implement these.

e) Transport is the largest contributor to UK domestic greenhouse gas emissions, responsible for 27% in 2019 but only 2.5% of this relates to buses and coaches.<sup>13</sup> Since 2011, carbon emissions from transport in York have risen by 8%<sup>14</sup>. To reduce carbon emissions, as well as air pollution and noise, the most effective solutions are to reduce traffic flows and congestion levels. Improving the vehicle fleet is also important. York already has a Clean Air Zone for buses which requires those entering more than five times per day to meet the latest vehicle standards for diesels (Euro 6) or to be electric.. In order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our network we require a better bus priority road scheme and for all services to connect directly with our main railway station.

CYC declared a climate emergency with a commitment to York being a Net Zero city by 2030. A recent CYC report <sup>15</sup>indicates that a 71% reduction in carbon emissions from transport will be needed if the CYC goal is to be met! Studies for Leeds City Region and Transport for the North both indicate that around half the carbon reduction will have to come from behavioural change. This suggests a significant focus on reducing the need to travel and promoting walking, cycling and public transport. Whilst York has good rail services, it currently has only one suburban station and relies mainly on buses and cycling for local transport.

If bus services are to be expanded as proposed in the York BSIP, with the further significant boost needed to replace more car journeys, there will be a clear requirement to convert or replace all the remaining diesel buses. The Government clearly needs to continue some form of “green bus” funding but on a continuing rather than a periodic basis, until new electric or hydrogen bus costs come down.

However, the main challenge will be in changing users’ behaviour. We have recently been involved, with York Civic Trust, in developing a Transport Strategy for York <sup>16</sup> In it we argue that the Council’s target of a 71% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030 will require, by that date, a 10% reduction in person-km travelled (largely through shorter journeys or alternatives to travel). Within the remaining travel, car use will have to fall, in person-km, by 20%. This will in turn be reflected in increases of 30% for buses, 25% for walking, and 80% for cycling. We suspect that these figures will be mirrored in many other urban areas. A 30% increase in bus patronage over that period is feasible (and, indeed, is reflected in CYC’s BSIP), but it requires immediate concerted and sustained action by LTAs, operators and Government.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

10. While we welcome the ambition shown by Government in its National Bus Strategy, we are intensely disappointed by its lack of commitment to working with LTAs and operators to achieve its aims. Unless the Government urgently changes its approach it will fail to achieve its own carbon targets, and deny LTAs the opportunity to realise theirs. Action is needed on several fronts, as we have indicated above. **In particular, we recommend that the Committee presses Government to:**

- 1. Accept that revenue funding is typically more cost-effective than capital, and provide significantly increased revenue support to enable bus service provision to expand;**
- 2. Sustain any commitments which it makes to capital funding rather than, as with BSIP, announcing late and significant cuts in the funding available;**
- 3. Establish a national campaign to demonstrate that a return to bus travel is safe, in public health terms, and essential to carbon reduction;**
- 4. Provide dedicated funds to support innovation and establish a database of successful innovations in the bus industry;**
- 5. Clarify and simplify its requirements for Enhanced Partnerships and Franchising, and significantly simplify the routes to implementing both;**

**6. Accept that LTAs and local operators are the best judges of the most appropriate solutions in their areas, and desist from micro-managing local actions.**

March 2022

## Endnotes

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- 1 <http://www.yorkbusforum.org>
- 2 <https://www.york.gov.uk/OurCity>
- 3 <https://www.itravelyork.info/downloads/file/82/york-s-bus-service-improvement-plan>
- 4 <https://www.iota.org.uk/blog/extended-bus-support-to-october-2022>
- 5 <https://www.westyorks-ca.gov.uk/media/7584/report-covid-19-transport-survey-wave-6.pdf>
- 6 <https://www.route-one.net/news/england-bus-funding-after-5-april-considered-as-nbs-money-cut/>
- 7 <https://www.cpt-uk.org/news/analysis-reveals-billions-of-pounds-shortfall-in-national-bus-strategy-plans/>
- 8 <https://www.transdevbus.co.uk/coastliner/were-extending-our-coastliner-york-ps1-evening-fares-until-31-march>
- 9 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apply-for-zero-emission-bus-funding>
- 10 <https://www.york.gov.uk/news/article/965/-8-4million-secured-for-more-electric-buses-in-york>
- 11 <https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/985006/opportunities-for-improving-transport-and-getting-better-value-for-money-by-changing-the-allocation-of-public-expenditure-to-transport>
- 12 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-unveils-levelling-up-plan-that-will-transform-uk>
- 13 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1009448/decarbonising-transport-a-better-greener-britain.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1009448/decarbonising-transport-a-better-greener-britain.pdf)
- 14 [https://yorkcivictrust.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Final-YCT\\_Transport-Strategy-2022\\_DIGITAL.pdf](https://yorkcivictrust.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Final-YCT_Transport-Strategy-2022_DIGITAL.pdf)
- 15 [https://democracy.york.gov.uk/documents/s157411/Scrutiny%20Report\\_Climate%20Change%20Strategy%20Update\\_March%202022.pdf](https://democracy.york.gov.uk/documents/s157411/Scrutiny%20Report_Climate%20Change%20Strategy%20Update_March%202022.pdf) Annex B
- 16 <https://yorkcivictrust.co.uk/home/planning/a-transport-strategy-for-york-2022/>