

# Written evidence submitted by Dales and Bowland Community Interest Company

## 1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Coronavirus pandemic has had a severe impact on the provision of sustainable transport in the Yorkshire Dales area.
- 1.2 CBSSG funding has been vital in supporting part of the bus network, but there are already significant gaps in provision.
- 1.3 The current reduced capacity of those bus services that are continuing to run is not sufficient to meet the needs of the area, and increased capacity is an urgent priority as the economy reopens.
- 1.4 Long-term public sector funding is urgently needed to avoid a damaging loss of bus services in rural areas in the aftermath of the pandemic, with consequent loss of economic, environmental, social and wellbeing benefits.

## 2. Dales and Bowland Community Interest Company

- 2.1 Dales and Bowland Community Interest Company (D&BCIC) is a volunteer-run, not-for-profit social enterprise. It is a subsidiary of the Yorkshire Dales Society (also known as Friends of the Dales), a registered charity.
- 2.2 D&BCIC manages the “DalesBus” network of weekend public bus services into and around the Yorkshire Dales National Park and Nidderdale/ Forest of Bowland Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. DalesBus serves a wide range of catchment communities across the North of England, including the urban areas of West Yorkshire, East Lancashire and Teesside. Although primarily designed to meet the needs of urban communities to access the Yorkshire Dales National Park and AONBs, DalesBus also provides a much-valued service for local communities within the Dales who otherwise would have no transport on Saturdays, Sundays and Bank Holidays, thereby further isolating those without access to their own transport.
- 2.3 Over 30,000 passenger journeys were made on services managed by D&BCIC in 2019-20.

## 3. Initial Impact of Coronavirus

- 3.1 The impact of the Coronavirus pandemic was first felt during March as passenger numbers started to decline with the start of government messaging on the need for social distancing.
- 3.2 Following the closure of hospitality businesses on 20<sup>th</sup> March passenger numbers reduced further to uneconomic levels on our next operating day of 22<sup>nd</sup> March.
- 3.3 Following the imposition of lockdown on 23<sup>rd</sup> March we took the decision to withdraw our three Sunday bus services between West Yorkshire and the Yorkshire Dales, but retain our two Sunday services in the Wensleydale area for essential journeys despite the greatly reduced passenger numbers.
- 3.4 The provision of Coronavirus Bus Service Support Grant (CBSSG) has been vital to enable these services to continue to operate.
- 3.5 Combined with the temporary withdrawal of the very limited commercial services in the area and the indefinite delay to our summer services, the vast Yorkshire Dales area has been left with just two bus services on Sundays and Bank Holidays, and a reduced network on other days.

## 4. Social Distancing

- 4.1 From late May onwards there have been moves to gradually ease lockdown measures and encouragement to increase bus services through the provision of CBSSG Restart Funding.
- 4.2 At the same time however, bus operators have introduced strict limits on capacity in order to facilitate social distancing at a distance of two metres. This has reduced the capacity of single decker buses to only around ten passengers.

- 4.3 It is wholly impracticable to operate popular, but infrequent, rural services such as those managed by D&BCIC with such limited capacity, and therefore we have been unable to reintroduce any bus services and many commercially operated services have continued with reduced timetables.
- 4.4 In contrast however restrictions on travel for outdoor recreation have been lifted, enabling car owners to visit the countryside. This has caused significant problems with over-crowding at honeypot destinations within the Yorkshire Dales, as well as issues with congestion and pollution.
- 4.5 The contrast between the freedoms offered to motorists and those dependent on public transport has generated concern amongst our regular passengers, who feel that they have been unfairly treated. This situation is likely to continue until such time as full capacity can be restored on the public transport network. Indeed, this situation may greatly worsen once hospitality businesses reopen.
- 4.6 Despite the welcome funding support offered by CBSSG Restart it is notable that many rural bus services are not operating at all, with areas such as Dentdale and Upper Wharfedale having no service, whilst other routes are severely curtailed (e.g. Harrogate to Pateley Bridge). The entire network of summer seasonal weekend DalesBus services is not running, and it appears increasingly likely that we will be unable to provide a service for the entire summer season.

## 5. Next Steps

- 5.1 We are greatly concerned that the coronavirus pandemic will have a severe lasting impact on the provision of sustainable transport in rural areas, including the Yorkshire Dales, even when capacity constraints are removed.
- 5.2 Even prior to the pandemic we had significant concerns about the lack of long-term public sector funding for the DalesBus network, with D&BCIC having to devote an increasing amount of scarce volunteer time to fundraising. This has been relatively successful, but much of the support received is only on a short-term one-off basis, and not sustainable.
- 5.3 The constant negative messaging around the use of public transport by the government during the pandemic is in stark contrast to the statement by the Secretary of State for Transport on Decarbonising Transport, published on 26th March 2020:  
*“Public transport and active travel will be the natural first choice for our daily activities. We will use our cars less and be able to rely on a convenient, cost-effective and coherent public transport network.”*
- 5.4 It will take significant effort to re-establish the public’s confidence in public transport and to reverse the recent switch towards car use into the Yorkshire Dales, but we believe this is essential to encourage more sustainable means of travel and move towards the targeted Net Zero Carbon Emissions which are vital to tackling the climate emergency.

## 6. Proposed Government Action

- 6.1 We propose the following actions to help tackle the increasing problems of providing sustainable access in and around rural areas, including protected landscapes such as the Yorkshire Dales National Park:
- 6.1.1 Relaxation at the earliest opportunity of social distancing rules on public transport to allow buses to operate at full capacity, adopting best practice from other countries whilst still following the science.
- 6.1.2 To support the above, launch of a positive messaging campaign around public transport, to highlight its vital economic, social, wellbeing and environmental benefits and reverse the stigma which has developed in recent months.
- 6.1.3 Allocation of funding from the £5billion Bus, Walking and Cycling Strategy Fund to local authorities (including National Parks) to secure existing rural bus networks as well as develop them further for the future. In order to facilitate planning for the aftermath of the pandemic and avoid a damaging loss of bus services in rural areas once CBSSG support comes to an end an announcement on this is needed quickly.

6.2 Dales and Bowland Community Interest Company would be happy to consider participating in any trial schemes to help secure the future of sustainable transport into and around the Yorkshire Dales area.

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