

Re-imagining Moorsbus – a proposed study

June 2019 note: this proposal has been overtaken thanks to the intervention of North Yorkshire County Council's Stronger Communities project which is funding a study covering much of this work and will be undertaken by consultants 'The Ideas Mine.'

1. What we want to achieve

- 1.1. We want to enable public access to, through and from the North York Moors in a more sustainable way – environmentally, socially and economically. This is based on the idea that everyone should be able to enjoy the National Park and its surroundings even if they don't have access to a private car.
- 1.2. We also want to give non-car travel opportunities to local communities wherever possible so they can access services and facilities and to complement and increase existing local bus and rail services.
- 1.3. This project hopes to identify ways of securing the future of public transport, either through Moorsbus, by alternative approaches, or by a combination of both.

2. Background to Moorsbus

- 2.1. Moorsbus has served local communities in and around the North York Moors as well as visitors to the area for almost 40 years.
- 2.2. It has evolved over time, growing from a one bus initiative of the then National Bus Company in 1981, through a period of significant growth managed and funded by the National Park Authority, especially in the 15 years between 1995 and 2010.
- 2.3. In addition to serving nearby towns and villages, it ran buses from as far away as Darlington, Hartlepool, Redcar, Saltburn, Peterlee, Bishop Auckland, Goole, Hull and York. Many of these routes ran through areas of high social deprivation.
- 2.4. It also ran a series of add-on services such as the Farndale Daffodil bus, park & ride services from Pickering, Thornton le Dale and Sutton Bank, Woldsbus (in the Yorkshire Wolds), vintage bus services, and the Forest Bike Bus to Dalby Forest.
- 2.5. Moorsbus had mainly been a Sunday operation, designed to offer services when regular routes were reduced or non-existent. In 1997 its operational days were significantly increased to reflect government funding opportunities. The result was a daily service during the summer period.
- 2.6. Following decreases in funding including the loss of a £50,000 annual grant from North Yorkshire County Council (the local transport authority), the National Park reduced Moorsbus services and finally withdrew all financial support and announced that services would cease completely after the 2013 season.
- 2.7. The reaction by the community saw the establishment of 'Friends of Moorsbus' in 2013 and – the following year – the Moorsbus Community Interest Company to safeguard the ethos of Moorsbus and set about the re-introduction of public services during summertime. From a one-vehicle operation on Sundays in 2014, the

service has increased to using 4 vehicles on Sundays, 3 on Saturdays and 1 on Fridays in 2018. A similar level of service operates in 2019.

- 2.8. Its funding is currently based on less than a third income from fares and passes, with the rest being sourced from small individual donations, grants from some town, parish and district councils, and a variety of other donations and grants. Reimbursement for use of the English National Concessionary pass is paid by the local transport authority, although the rates are derisory – about £1 for the journey from York to Danby (over 50 miles). The equivalent ‘normal’ Moorsbus fare is £9.50.
- 2.9. All our services are registered local bus services operating to a published timetable and agreed with the Traffic Commissioners. Whilst this may be a constraint, it offers intending passengers confidence in the quality and reliability of the operation and its ‘turn up and go’ philosophy (which may reflect the demands of both local users and visitors).
- 2.10. The current services are predicated on a number of factors, including the limited road network which is available for buses of any size, the availability of quality operators with appropriate vehicles within the area or its main catchments, regulations and other external constraints for local bus operations, and funding streams, including through fares, pass reimbursement, grants, donations and in-kind support. Population sizes – urban and rural – also dictate where services can operate more sustainably. Although financially counter-intuitive, Moorsbus tries to serve locations with a low social deprivation index.
- 2.11. Surveys of passengers have identified a wish list of routes and destinations and, whilst the CIC looks at every suggestion carefully, most of these are not suitable for full-sized or even midi-sized vehicles. The use of 16 seat minibuses has been ruled out due to their limited capacity and the regulations which forbid standing passengers. The cost of chartering a minibus and driver is not significantly lower than hiring a large vehicle. Given fluctuating demand (sometimes weather dependent, sometimes dictated by a group of, say, 18 walkers who just turn up), we opt for larger vehicles which can undertake journeys from population centres at the beginning and end of the day when demand is strongest.
- 2.12. Much of our ethos is built around 5 Cs: cost; continuity; comfort; confidence; and communications. Some issues such as ‘continuity’ are important for passengers who are generally averse to change to bus routes or times. However, funders often seek ‘new and innovative’ projects rather than supporting existing services. Whilst several of the ‘Cs’ affect most bus operations, ‘confidence’ is even more important for Moorsbus when it targets infrequent users of public transport, those whose knowledge of the local geography is limited, or new users.
- 2.13. A further C is ‘Community’, reflecting the basis of an organisation which is responsive and responsible, and tries to serve the widest definition of community, including future generations, as well as the environment.
- 2.14. The work of the Friends of Moorsbus and the Moorsbus Community Interest Company is undertaken entirely by volunteers. The CIC directors receive no remuneration and do not claim expenses such as travel. Most practical work (fundraising, development, timetable creation, contract negotiation, publicity and day-to-day supervision) falls to the three Directors.

3. Benefits

- 3.1. Known benefits from our public transport operations include: improved air quality; less visual intrusion of parked cars and the demand for even more car parking space; reduced accident risk and road safety improvement including reduced need for major engineering solutions; social inclusion; opportunities to undertake linear walks and access a variety of attractions and businesses; improved access for volunteering and work; increase in the potential market for sustainable tourism in the area including overseas visitors; health and well-being benefits through physical, mental and social gains; as well as other intangible, or other hidden benefits which this project may identify. The economic beneficiaries include local businesses, many of whom are very small and in deep rural locations. The principle of using commercial contractors to provide the buses helps retain employment and safeguards the availability of transport and transport providers for local communities.

4. Target markets

- 4.1. Travellers to the North York Moors (who, from where, to where, when) and those who *don't* travel to the North York Moors. Moorsbus attempts to replicate journeys undertaken by the average car-borne visitor who generally 'grazes' from site to site rather than simply going to one key destination: a coffee here, an attraction there, a view, a meal, a stroll. To a certain extent, this reflects the tourism product of the North York Moors. These journeys and destinations are often weather-dependent, resulting in varied bus loadings including standees on busy days. Overseas visitors are an increasingly important market, especially as many are reliant on public transport and – unless travel opportunities are promoted to them – they are more likely to stay in major cities such as York and never venture into the North York Moors.
- 4.2. Travellers from the North York Moors (who, from where, to where, when) and those local residents who don't travel. Local communities have progressively lost public transport access across the rural area, with many villages being reduced to a once a week service, if that. Although car dependency is thus high, there are hidden pockets of severe deprivation within and immediately adjacent to the North York Moors. Overall, 20% of local households are without a car, with a great many more individuals not having access to one whilst the main breadwinner is using the vehicle. As the population ages, an increasing number will find that they are no longer capable or permitted to drive.
- 4.3. What routes / journeys are currently available? As explained above, routes reflect a number of factors: availability of operators and suitable vehicles; reasonable population density; socio-demographics; available road network; suitable attractions; etc.
- 4.4. A new approach? Moorsbus CIC has an open mind as to how its objectives could best be met.
- 4.5. Successful and cost-effective marketing is hard to achieve given the geographical spread across two regions (Yorkshire and the North East), as well as diverse communities served by a large number of smaller media. In addition, potential users can come from literally anywhere, including from overseas. Producing

understandable and timely detailed information so people can plan itineraries with confidence demands working almost a year ahead and thus needs a financial commitment that the services will be able to be funded. We recognise that the use of social media needs to be exploited more fully, as well as identifying other approaches.

5. Delivery mechanism

- 5.1. Existing public transport (rail / bus) operating commercially or with public subsidy. Community Transport options.
- 5.2. Other agencies with responsibility for supporting access throughout the area: NYCC, NYMNPA
- 5.3. Need for a 'new' organisation or delivery approach.
- 5.4. Charitable status; community based. Merging with similar organisations to rationalise workloads.
- 5.5. New partnership working with commercial, public and third sector.

6. Funding options

- 6.1. Could the preferred options be commercially viable, if not, what external sources are likely to be available and for what period of time.
- 6.2. What are the options for increasing direct income (fares and pass reimbursement).
- 6.3. How can costs be reduced.
- 6.4. Is capital funding more likely to be available and if so, what capital projects would support Moorsbus.

7. Outputs from the study

- 7.1. An exploration of new ways (including a range of approaches) of providing public access in the North York Moors area. There are no holds barred – the results may suggest that there is no obvious way of fulfilling the brief, that handing over to some other agency may be best, or that what we deliver is perfect (we would disagree with the latter). It may be that an entirely new approach is required.
- 7.2. This study should work within the current legislative framework, although it may identify approaches which would require local, regional or national change.
- 7.3. Recommendations should identify what services are required – geographically, seasonally, by size of vehicle and frequency.
- 7.4. How these services could effectively be developed, co-ordinated and delivered.
- 7.5. What company, partnership or other structure is required, including any new structures and company types most suited to deliver the services.
- 7.6. How best to resource the recommendations in the short- and long-term.
- 7.7. There is an assumption that nothing is impossible, but pragmatism is also a pre-requisite.
- 7.8. Although we imagine that this study will identify ways forward for access in and around the North York Moors, the findings may also be relevant to other locations.