

Scoping Note: Bus Improvement Study

Introduction

This note scopes out a study into the bus service in York. The study will examine the current bus service provision in the city, specifically:

- The local ‘stage carriage’ network of services operating entirely within the Council’s boundary;
- The park and ride service;
- Longer distance bus services either linking York with rural areas or other towns/ cities such as Malton, Selby, Easingwold and Leeds; and
- Other aspects of the “wider” bus network, including city centre tour buses, home to school transport using buses and Dial & Ride transport.

The study will not make recommendations about scheduled coach services, coaches operating excursions to York, rail services or taxi/ private hire services, although they will clearly be important considerations in the study because these modes form a wider public transport network in the city.

An initial view of the bus network in York

An initial review of the bus network in York has been undertaken, based on a mixture of discussion and a workshop session with the public transport officers of the Council and a document review. In the view of the Project Manager, the most pertinent characteristics of/ issues with the network in York are:

- The bus network is **fragmented**¹ with nine bus operators providing frequent (more than every 2 hours) bus services in the city. Although this has a benefit of ensuring that supported service tenders are well contested, it makes the partnership with operators complicated to manage because there are so many operator stakeholders;
- There is **on the road competition** on nearly all of the key radial corridors in the city between bus services operating wholly in York (often part of

¹ For example, there are only 13 operators in Leeds, despite it being a polycentric local authority with one of the largest single LA populations in the UK.

First or Yorkshire Coastliner's network) and inter-urban/ rural bus services which operate outside of the city (e.g. to Selby/Leeds/Malton etc). On some corridors park and ride services are overlaid onto this pattern. There are several implications of this:

- In the absence of a multi-operator ticket, effective service frequency is reduced to users with operator specific multi-trip tickets (often the cheapest way to travel) because they cannot use all buses on their route;
 - Some corridors may be “overbussed” with viability adversely effected by too many buses chasing too few passengers, with knock on effects for the viability of operators in York generally, particularly in the shape of higher fares on stagecarriage (non-park and ride) buses or relatively low service frequencies on some corridors;
 - The park and ride service may be perceived as something quite different from the local bus service (because of its high quality and relatively low fares) with the implication that some people may prefer to use the park and ride service when the local stage-carriage bus service might be a more rational choice for them; and
 - FirstGroup, the prominent operator has lost some market share to other operators providing high frequency services in the York urban area (e.g. Yorkshire Coastliner and York Pullman). As a result the FirstGroup management, whilst reluctant to withdraw from the market, face the challenge of ensuring that FirstYork is a profitable operation at the same time as ensuring that their services remain attractive to the customer.
- In the **city centre** bus services suffer from congestion, with an adverse effect on service reliability. The absence of a central bus hub in York also means that layover points are dispersed around the city and there is no clear single point where passengers can interchange between services. The historically constrained road network in York imposes limitations on stop locations and the facilities which can be provided in each location. In particular, some of the park and ride stops currently experience greater use than was anticipated when the services were initially planned, and are now congested at peak times. There are a

number of Summer-only tour bus routes around the city centre, many of which are operated using elderly vehicles with poor emission standards;

- Some rural locations in the city council's area perceive that they suffer a **poor and infrequent service** (for example, Elvington). Some areas of York (e.g. Rawcliffe) and large villages on the fringe of York (e.g. Poppleton) also perceive that they have inadequate services;
- **Development pressures** in York have the potential to increase traffic volumes, congestion and delay on the road network. There is a very real concern that the bus network, as it is currently configured, may not be attractive enough to deliver the required level of modal shift away from car to mitigate congestion from the new development;
- The **relationship** between the Council and bus operators is sometimes challenged through a lack of local consultation and/or decisions which are taken to meet commercial objectives and in which the Council has no say (eg fares increases).
- There is a need to deliver a **step change improvement** in the quality of the bus offer in the City so as to encourage more people to travel by bus. This will reduce the impacts of traffic congestion and improve air quality in the City to the benefit of York economy and environment.
- The outcome of the **traffic congestion ad-hoc scrutiny committee** determined that the area of improvement that would deliver the maximum impact on congestion in the city was to the bus network.

Issues and objectives

It is therefore proposed that the study focuses on the following issues:

- Concerns about the perceived **under-performance** of the bus network in the city, in relation to:
 - The Council's expectation of its performance (and its ability to deliver modal shift, which is crucial to the Council's "Get York Moving" corporate objective and York's development plans); and
 - The better performance of bus networks in other tourist/ historic towns, such as Oxford, Cambridge, Brighton and Nottingham, which are perceived to be good practice exemplars
- Concerns about the **viability** of the bus network in the medium term, particularly the recent decline of the York bus network over the past few years (with the loss of early morning and evening services) and the implications of this for delivering bus services in York;
- The challenge the Council has faced in delivering change through voluntary **partnership** with bus operators and the difficulty of delivering some of the Council's key priorities, such as an integrated ticket in York, discount tickets for young people, urban design objectives such as those proposed in the York New City Beautiful report and air quality improvements through lower emission vehicles;
- What the Council's **regulatory** options are for delivering improvements to the bus services in the city and which of the various regulatory frameworks for bus services (e.g. quality contract, statutory quality partnership, voluntary quality partnership) would be best for delivering the changes which the Council wish to see in the city.

The study will consider each question in turn, examining a series of hypotheses and arriving at judgements in each case as to whether:

- The Council's perception of a problem can be evidenced through data analysis;
- Whether there is more that the Council can be doing to deliver change within existing framework or whether there is under-performance because of operator behaviour; and

- Whether an alternative mechanism for delivering improvements to the bus network, such as a quality contract scheme, would offer the Council a more economic, efficient and effective means of delivering the changes it wishes to see.

Methodology

A methodology for undertaking the study is shown in the table below.

Table 1: Study Methodology

Issue	Hypotheses to examine	Methodology/ data to use
<p>Under-performance of the network</p>	<p>There are absolute problems with York’s bus network (e.g. buses are unreliable, fares are rising at a rate above inflation, service frequencies are poor, geographical coverage is poor, vehicle standards are poor, operator information is poor, the network is not legible). Further, many cross-city journeys are difficult, long or expensive, especially those involving lower frequency routes and different operators.</p>	<p>Desktop study using various data sources:</p> <p>Readily available data: Service timings, fares levels, punctuality data for bus services, accessibility data, vehicles in use in the city, information provided in the city.</p> <p>Need to collect: user/ non-user perceptions of service quality, price etc through various survey methods including the residents’ survey, citizens’ panel, on bus surveys, stakeholder consultation and focus groups. Bus operator views on service quality, current failings and successes of the York network</p>

	<p>York's bus network is poor compared to other historic towns and cities.</p>	<p>Benchmarking study comparing York to exemplars of best practice – such as Oxford, Cambridge, Brighton and Nottingham.</p> <p>Readily available: Comparative travel times and costs to key local trip destinations; Information from York Council research visit to Oxford, April 2011.</p> <p>Need to collect: data on fares, frequencies, patronage trends. Telephone interview with officers at each location.</p>
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Issue	Hypotheses to examine	Methodology/ data to use
Viability of the network over the medium term	Some corridors in York are overbussed because of on the road competition between operators.	Consider viability of services on corridors – extent of tendered services, passenger numbers, potential passenger revenues. Compare against operating costs. Readily available: timetables, patronage data, information on commercial and supported services. Need to collect: nothing
	There are opportunities to improve the viability of the bus network through better co-ordination of the stage-carriage and park and ride networks in the city.	Construction of a series of corridor models for the stage-carriage/ park and ride corridors. Consider whether alternative corridor configurations might offer better value or better services for passengers.

		<p>Readily available: timetable data for services which can be used to construct models.</p> <p>Need to collect: attitudinal data about perception of stage-carriage buses and park and ride.</p>
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	<p>There are opportunities to improve the viability of the bus network through better co-ordination of the stage-carriage and home to school bus networks.</p>	<p>GIS based exercise to identify if any school services could be subsumed into stagecarriage services.</p> <p>Readily available: GIS data on services</p> <p>Need to collect: nothing</p>
	<p>There is insufficient competition for tendered services in York.</p>	<p>Consider outcomes of recent tender contests.</p> <p>Readily available: information on tender contests</p> <p>Need to collect: nothing</p>
	<p>The viability of the bus network in its current form is likely to decline in the medium term.</p>	<p>Consider background patronage trend and likely future developments. Consider implications for bus services in York.</p>

		<p>Readily available: background patronage trend. Development proposals (e.g. Access York, proposals for specific developments). Outputs of other workstreams in this area.</p> <p>Needs to collect: nothing in addition to information already collected.</p>
Issue	Hypotheses to examine	Methodology/ data to use
Challenges of partnership working with operators	<p>It is not possible to deliver key political commitments in York, specifically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A competitively priced multi-operator ticket ▪ A young persons' discount ticket ▪ emissions reductions supporting the AQMAs in 	<p>Examination of Quality Bus Partnership (QBP) meeting notes. Discussion with officers, bus operators, QBP chair, Bus Users UK.</p> <p>Readily available: meeting minutes.</p> <p>Need to collect: discussion with stakeholders.</p>

	<p>York</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ service improvements in line with wider Council strategy (e.g. New York City Beautiful, new developments, Council Plan) <p>through the current partnership with operators</p>	
<p>Regulatory options</p>	<p>A quality contract scheme is the only practicable way for City of York Council to achieve its desired outcomes for the bus network.</p>	<p>Compare historic objectives and outcomes using data collected in earlier phases of the study.</p> <p>Consider future objectives and whether they can be achieved through the current partnership.</p> <p>Consider the costs of implementing a quality contract in York and whether implementing a QCS is feasible and can be justified by current</p>

		market failure. Consider what alternative options might exist.
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Timescales

Timescales are configured to meet a deadline of the end of March for a draft study. The table overleaf sets out indicative timescales for each workstream.

