

Report for discussion by the Economy, Place, Access & Transport Scrutiny Committee on 25 June 2024

Purpose

1. This is the report of the scrutiny review into York's Dial & Ride service. It contains a number of recommendations that members are invited to consider.

Background

2. At the EPAT meeting on 22 January 2024 it was agreed to form a Task & Finish Group to undertake some research with a view to coming up with options for consideration should the council wish to commission a replacement for the Dial & Ride service. This was prompted by the decision by York Wheels to cease operating the Dial & Ride service which they had been commissioned by City of York Council to provide.
3. Members of the cross-party Task & Finish Group were Cllr Jane Burton (Labour), Cllr Chris Steward (Conservative) and Cllr Stephen Fenton (Liberal Democrat)
4. The agreed objectives of the review were as follows:
 - a. Establish the cost and specification of the Dial & Ride service that was commissioned by CYC and provided by York Wheels until 31 December 2023;
 - b. Establish whether there remains a need for a Dial & Ride-type service in York;
 - c. Establish the nature and scope of current Community Transport provision in the city;
 - d. Identify examples of services similar to York's Dial & Ride which are provided in other areas of a similar size to City of York Council area;
 - e. Make recommendations to Officers / Executive Members on possible options for the reinstatement of a Dial & Ride-type service, to complement work to be undertaken by officers to explore the level of funding that may be required for a future service.

5. In order to achieve its objectives, the Task & Finish Group agreed the following tasks:
 - a. Undertake an online review of Dial & Ride-type provision in comparator towns and cities;
 - b. Where appropriate, arrange information-gathering Teams or phone calls with service providers in other towns and cities;
 - c. Meet with CYC officers and request relevant documentation in order to better understand the cost and specification of the Dial & Ride service commissioned from York Wheels;
 - d. Meet with representatives from York Wheels to better understand the issues that led to them withdrawing the Dial & Ride service;
 - e. Meet with representatives of the York Bus Forum and other interested individuals and organisations such as advocacy groups for older people and disabled people;
 - f. Speak with residents who used the Dial & Ride service to better understand the impact on them of the service's withdrawal.

Information gathering

6. Between February and April 2024 Task & Finish Group members met a number of stakeholders, both remotely and in person, to gather information relevant to the five agreed objectives.
7. Meetings took place with individuals from the following individuals and organisations:
 - City of York Council (CYC)
 - York Wheels
 - York Bus Forum
 - Age UK York
 - York Older Persons Assembly (YOPA)
 - John Bibby
 - NHS England
 - Humber & North Yorkshire Integrated Care Board
 - York Council for Voluntary Service (CVS)
 - East Riding of Yorkshire Council (ERYC)
 - North Yorkshire Council (NYC)
 - Uber
 - East Yorkshire Buses

8. The Task & Finish Group is very grateful to all of those who participated in these meetings for their time and willingness to engage. We are also grateful to YOPA, York Bus Forum and York Neighbours for sharing details of the review with their members and customers and inviting them to contact us with their feedback on the impact of the loss of the Dial & Ride service.

Findings

9. Set out below is a summary of the information gathered from the conversations held with stakeholders, split by objective.

Objective 1 - Establish the cost and specification of the Dial & Ride service that was commissioned by CYC and provided by York Wheels until 31 December 2023

10. Through discussions with Sam Fryers (CYC) and Karen Woodward (York Wheels) we were able to better understand the arrangements for the operation of the Dial & Ride service.
11. By way of background, at its inception Dial & Ride was operated by Yorkshire Ambulance Service. It was a pre-booked minibus service through which customers were picked up from their home and dropped off at a pre-determined destination, usually a supermarket or the city centre (St Sampson's Centre). The split was 2/3rd supermarket and 1/3rd City Centre. Customers were then dropped off back at their homes. The minibuses provided an opportunity for social interaction between passengers. The service catered exclusively for older people and for disabled people of any age. The minibuses were all wheelchair accessible. The charge for a return journey was £8, or £4 with a concessionary pass.
12. Dial & Ride served many village communities and also suburban communities such as Foxwood where there are a number of older persons accommodation complexes.
13. The table below sets out the total number of Dial & Ride passenger journeys for each financial year since 2014/15. No data was collected in 2020 or 2021 due to Covid.

2014/15	16,687
2015/16	15,767
2016/17	16,301
2017/18	15,510
2018/19	12,697
2019/20	unavailable
2020/21	unavailable
2021/22	5,624
2022/23	8,021
2023/24	5,929 (Apr-Dec)

Source: Data provided by City of York Council

14. York Wheels had operated Dial & Ride for around 20 years, during which time its relationship with CYC had evolved. Until 2018 the booking system for Dial & Ride was managed by CYC staff in CYC premises. The minibuses were owned by CYC but operated by York Wheels. Between 2018 and 2023 steps were taken to move responsibility for operating the Dial & Ride service to York Wheels – the system was operated by York Wheels staff based at the CYC depot, CYC owned three of the four buses with the fourth being owned by York Wheels. The timetable was evolved for four vehicles.
15. Prior to 2022, the Service Level Agreement (SLA) between CYC and York Wheels included patronage targets which were largely met.
16. In the new SLA an annual revenue grant included £98,000 for operating the Dial & Ride service and £23,000 to support the volunteer car service. This was based on a cataloguing of all operating costs. There were very few performance metrics included in the new SLA which was signed in late 2022.
17. CYC entered into a separate capital grant agreement with York Wheels through which it awarded York Wheels £190,000 to purchase two new minibuses. These new diesel vehicles were delivered in February and April 2023. The fleet also included one old minibus that was gifted to York Wheels by CYC, and one minibus owned by York Wheels.
18. No financial contributions have been requested from the supermarkets that benefited from the custom of Dial & Ride service

users, though funds from a section 106 agreement associated with the Vangarde development did fund the purchase of one vehicle in 2015. Another bus was funded using a Department for Transport grant in 2016, which was the one owned by York Wheels.

19. The minibuses had to be inspected by CYC every nine weeks as is normal practice for public transport vehicles, which we understand put pressure on service planning if there was a delay in the buses being inspected. York Wheels told us that there were viability challenges under both the old and new SLAs due to 'red tape.' We also heard that traffic congestion had impacted the reliability of the timetable. Passenger numbers in 2023 were impacted by the frequent short-notice cancellation of services due to mechanical issues.
20. Mechanical issues arose with the two new vehicles which caused them to be out of service for some time. Issues relating to the engine of one of the vehicles were pursued with the chassis manufacturer (Fiat). The coachbuilding company from whom the minibuses were purchased (Mellors) went into administration in November 2023, which further complicated the situation. York Wheels were incurring costs in insurance and drivers' wages but weren't receiving sufficient passenger income due to the minibuses being off the road. Costs were also being incurred in storing the vehicles at Hazel Court.
21. York Wheels first raised concerns with CYC in July 2023 about challenges with the Dial & Ride service and raised a 'red flag' in October. York Wheels' requests for legal assistance from CYC in seeking redress for the vehicle mechanical failures were declined as we understand it was felt that considerable support had already been provided, though CYC have provided assistance with vehicle insurance and storage costs. Ultimately York Wheels decided to cease operating the Dial & Ride service on 31 December 2023 in order to protect the financial sustainability of the charity and ensure the continued operation of the volunteer car service. This was announced in the media with assistance from CYC. Many users of the service were surprised at the news, and many were and are very upset.
22. York Wheels advise that demand for the volunteer car service has increased since Dial & Ride ended, which has further highlighted the need to recruit more drivers. But for many residents, the

independence that the Dial & Ride service offered has not been replaced.

Objective 2 - Establish whether there remains a need for a Dial & Ride-type service in York

23. The Task Group met with a number of organisations who advocate for and support older residents in York and for public transport users – York Wheels, York Bus Forum, York Older Persons Assembly (YOPA), York Council for Voluntary Service (CVS), Age UK York and the CYC ‘Age Friendly York’ team. We were also able to tap into the knowledge and expertise of a number of experts in the field of community transport.
24. YOPA told us about the Older People’s Survey undertaken in 2017 involving a number of organisations which received over 900 responses. Eighteen recommendations arose from the survey, one of which related to better access to community transport.
25. The 2017 YOPA survey was followed by an Age Friendly York survey in 2019 called ‘Your Journey’. This led to the following action point approved by the Ageing Well Partnership – “Find methods to increase options for people to get to community activities and other locations where public transport does not suffice.”
26. In 2022 YOPA and York Bus Forum undertook a survey of concessionary bus passengers. This confirmed that the Covid pandemic had affected some people’s confidence in using public transport, and passenger numbers had not returned to pre-Covid levels. Dial & Ride minibuses provided an alternative which some older and disabled people preferred.
27. We heard about the task and finish group established by Age Friendly York 18 months ago which identified two key issues – anxiety about going out and a loss of confidence. The establishment of this group came after an initiative launched by the Multiple Sclerosis society in York in 2018 which led to the formation of the York Community Transport Group, which was active for a couple of years until the Covid pandemic.
28. The main prompt for the establishment of the group by Age Friendly York was the difficulties wheelchair users had when

booking a taxi in advance. This group had community groups, including York Wheels, in attendance. They invited a taxi company to explain the challenges for offering an equal service to wheelchair users. The basic problem was that there were not sufficient suitable drivers to be able to guarantee offering a service. They also talked about “dead miles” in that the few suitable taxis there were had to travel further to each destination and the dropping off often took longer which legally cannot be charged for.

29. Age Friendly York started to explore the potential to use the £10,000 community transport fund allocated to Ways to Wellbeing (Social Prescribing) to provide some form of voucher compensation scheme as a supplement to the standard taxi fare. Unfortunately, this grant is no longer available.
30. We also heard about the Age UK initiative ‘Getting out and about’ which is built into the ‘Frailty Hub’ work being led by Nimbuscare.
31. A consistent theme in what we heard is that Dial & Ride was an important option for those who are able to use public transport but struggle to get to and from the nearest bus stop.
32. York Wheels did do some work to promote the Dial & Ride service when it was operating, for example through organisations that were engaged in supporting older people. YOPA felt that there was scope for publicity campaigns through parish and community newsletters.
33. It was suggested that any replacement Dial & Ride service could broaden the eligibility criteria to include people of all ages in communities that are not well-served by public transport, on the basis that this may help to make the service more financially sustainable. It would also provide better equity of access, particularly for low-income households. It was also suggested that some of York’s Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) funding could be used to support the restoration of a Dial & Ride service.
34. We heard that social prescribers used to signpost residents to the Dial & Ride service as a means of becoming more independent and rebuilding self-confidence.

35. It was also recognised that not all desired journeys are between someone's home and a supermarket or the city centre – there is also demand for transport within communities.
36. The Task Group is grateful to York Bus Forum, YOPA and York Neighbours for inviting their members to contact us with their personal testimonies of what the Dial & Ride service meant to them. Over 40 representations were received via e-mail and telephone and the comments received are summarised below. Respondents were from villages and communities including Strensall, Heworth, Dunnington, Huntington, Elvington, Haxby, Osbaldwick and Foxwood.
- Would be happy to pay a bit more if it meant that the service could be re-introduced
 - Partner who has dementia can't understand what has happened to the Dial & Ride bus
 - Using the regular bus service would mean having to walk too far a distance in town, for example getting from Exhibition Square to Parliament Street
 - Used the Dial & Ride service twice a week, drivers were always extremely helpful. Now have to rely on others for help with ordering items online. Very acute loss of independence
 - Am physically disabled and cannot use regular buses. Could supermarkets sponsor the service?
 - Living alone, nobody to do the shopping for me, miss the service so much
 - Taxi rides from Strensall are costing £20 each way
 - Have lost my freedom – Dial & Ride provided a chance to get out and shop, now reliant on family
 - Used to be able to order items online when the Dial & Ride service ended but unable to do so now due to macular degeneration

Objective 3 – Establish the nature and scope of current Community Transport provision in the city

37. York Wheels' volunteer car service enables older and disabled residents to book a journey to and from any destination within the city such as York Hospital, for less than the cost of a taxi. The service can also take people to out-of-city destinations.

38. York Wheels told us about the work they are doing with the local NHS to enable people to access transport to and from medical appointments through their volunteer car service. This is something that Dial & Ride could not have supported.
39. The cessation of the Dial & Ride service has highlighted the lack of access to wheelchair-accessible vehicles in the city, with it being almost impossible to pre-book accessible taxis, especially in the evenings.
40. Dial & Ride was described to us as a 'safety net' which could step in when bus services were either withdrawn or routes were changed.
41. Age UK York runs a number of minibuses that enable older people to access activities where they can have social interaction, access help and support and have lunch at eleven day clubs around the city, with 180 day club places provided and 24 dementia club places. A fee of £8 covers the transport cost. This is under a contract with CYC which runs until September 2024. This contract has been running for eight years, with a small waiting list of potential service users.
42. Three minibuses owned by Age UK support the day club service (most service users are over 75), a further two minibuses are used for non-emergency ambulance transport for all ages. Three minibuses can accommodate wheelchair users. Two minibuses were purchased thanks to a charitable donation. The minibus drivers are paid staff members.
43. Age UK works closely with CYC Local Area Co-ordinators who are able to identify individuals who would benefit from these services. Age UK have identified that getting to the nearest bus stop is the biggest obstacle that many older or disabled people face.
44. We heard about the initiative launched by the Multiple Sclerosis society in York referred to above. Through this initiative local charities were encouraged to come together to share information and expertise. The expert whom we met with encouraged us to seek to articulate a broader vision for community transport, potentially incorporating schemes such as a 'Taxi Bus' to address

gaps in the existing bus network and better use of Park & Ride sites as 'hubs'.

45. We heard about the impact of ongoing pressures on public service finances, for example through the loss of a £10,000 transport fund that was part of the 'Ways to Wellbeing' project supported by the NHS / local authority Better Care Fund.
46. We spoke with a representative from the Humber & North Yorkshire Integrated Care Board about the ongoing work to bring together community transport providers, councils, healthcare providers and voluntary and community sector organisations. A key aim is to do some mapping work to identify where community transport organisations are and better understand their eligibility criteria, service demand and the basis on which they are funded.

Objective 4 - Identify examples of services similar to York's Dial & Ride which are provided in other areas of a similar size to City of York Council area

47. The Task Group's online research confirmed that cities similar in nature to York, such as Bath¹, Chester², Norwich³ and Cambridge⁴ – all have community transport provision similar in some respects to York's Dial & Ride.
48. Task Group members met with representatives from a number of organisations providing commercial and community transport services including commercial bus operators, East Riding of Yorkshire Council (ERYC) and North Yorkshire Council (NYC). We also spoke with a taxi service operator.
49. We heard that in order for commercial bus or taxi operators to be interested in providing a Dial & Ride replacement service there would need to be long-term certainty to enable proper planning, and a detailed understanding of passenger numbers, routes, costs and income. There were interesting suggestions that a 'Hub and

¹ <https://beta.bathnes.gov.uk/community-transport>

² <https://www.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk/residents/transport-and-roads/public-transport/community-transport>

³

https://www.norwich.gov.uk/info/20389/streets_and_travel/1532/norwich_door_to_door_accessible_mobility_transport_service

⁴ <https://cambridgedialaride.org.uk/>

Spoke' model could work, for example connecting villages in the south and west of the city with the Askham Bar Park & Ride site from where connecting services would be available, though it was noted that this would not be a feasible option for all former Dial & Ride passengers.

50. We heard from a taxi service operator about an approach being taken by Milton Keynes whereby support for regular bus services has been scaled back, with instead investment being made into a digital-based demand-responsive service. We also heard about a minibus scheme in Bath & Bristol that had not been a success and a demand-responsive service trialled in East Leeds had been similarly unsuccessful.
51. We heard from North Yorkshire Council (NYC) about the 'Go Local' brand which is owned by the community transport sector across the county. It is essentially a website portal. Some community transport schemes operate with NYC support, some without. Most community transport operators are from the voluntary sector. There are five supported Dial-a-Ride schemes (four of which provide one-to-one journeys) and 15 volunteer car schemes. NYC offers capital grants to cover 75% of the costs of minibus purchase and provides financial support for Dial-a-Ride services. These are usually five-year grant agreements.
52. Many of the community transport initiatives began in 2015/16 in response to a scaling back in support for bus services – subsidy has fallen from £5.5m to £1.5m. NYC receives a financial contribution from Health to support community transport. NYC do not require services they support to restrict access only to older people and disabled people. Covid affected patronage, which is now back to around 70% of pre-Covid levels.
53. NYC are putting in place a funding formula whereby volunteer car scheme journeys attract a fixed payment per journey, with a mileage rate paid by the passenger. Dial-a-Ride journeys are supported on the basis of a payment per passenger journey.
54. Scarborough Dial-a-Ride, for example, provide 1,600 journeys each month. There are a number of 'shopper trip' and 'taxi bus' services in areas such as the Esk Valley, Craven and Harrogate

which connect villages with shopping centres. Some services are operated by NYC fleet services.

55. It was suggested that community transport services operated in Scarborough, Ryedale and Selby may be of most relevance in terms of potential future collaborative working with York, given the existing service links with York Hospital. York Wheels currently work alongside these community transport organisations and work together under NHS SLAs.
56. We heard from East Riding of Yorkshire Council (ERYC) that in their area the main community transport operations are based in the Goole, Howdenshire, Beverley and Holderness areas, with each having between 7-10 minibuses. This gives near-county-wide coverage of community transport provision. Beverley also has a volunteer car scheme. ERYC don't award grants, but tender contracts. ERYC provides the back-office function through which all community transport bookings for council-contracted services are made. The MediBus service has been operating for 20 years with 20,000 journeys each year to hospital and GP appointments. There are nine MediBus routes, three of which are operated by the ERYC fleet, one of which connects Pocklington with York Hospital.
57. The MiBus service is similar to York's Dial & Ride, focusing on shopping trips. It is run entirely by community transport organisations (under contract to the council) and operates on a zonal system with villages clustered together. MiBus and MediBus are separately tendered with the spec including a requirement for vehicles to be fully-accessible. 25% of the scoring in the tender process relates to social value.
58. All three Community Transport groups also operate additional minibus services funded either through external grants, fares charged or a mixture of both. These tend to be shopping services or social trips.
59. Operators invoice ERYC for the day rate for minibus operation, driver cost and mileage rate minus the income received from passengers. Fares usually cover around 25% of operating costs. Service users pay £10 per return journey, or £5 concessionary fare. Both MiBus and MediBus have eligibility criteria including age, disability, lack of own transport and geographical isolation.

60. ERYC have used BSIP funding to support the expansion of the MediBus service.
61. There is very little MiBus activity in the Stamford Bridge / Pocklington area, which means there is no easily scalable service that could be expanded to serve York.

Recommendations

62. The fifth and final objective for the Task Group was to make recommendations to Officers / Executive Members on possible options for the reinstatement of a Dial & Ride-type service, to complement work to be undertaken by officers to explore the level of funding that may be required for a future service.
63. Having completed the information-gathering exercise, Task & Finish Group members have drafted some recommendations which EPAT committee members are invited to review. It is anticipated that once agreed, the recommendations will be presented to the Executive for their consideration.
 - Recommendation 1 – CYC should as soon as possible take steps to ensure the provision of a Community Transport service for York residents which would fulfil the need that has been unmet since the cessation of the Dial & Ride service operated by York Wheels. This could be a service that is commissioned or run in-house
 - Recommendation 2 – CYC should ensure that funding is available – either from internal or external sources - to enable a Community Transport service to be provided. This should include (but not be limited to) looking in the round at all transport-related expenditure, such as revenue support for specific schemes, Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) funding and potential financial contributions from supermarkets which benefit from custom generated by Dial & Ride trips
 - Recommendation 3 – CYC should engage with neighbouring local authorities, the Combined Authority, other public bodies and the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector to identify opportunities for joint-working and potentially joint commissioning in the field of Community Transport

- Recommendation 4 – In drawing up the specification for a new Community Transport service, consideration should be given to broadening the passenger eligibility criteria beyond the client groups previously served by Dial & Ride (older people and disabled people). Consideration should also be given to reviewing the destinations to be served by a reinstated service
- Recommendation 5 – In drawing up the specification for a new Community Transport service, the CYC adult social care team, the CYC 'Age Friendly York' team and advocacy groups for older and disabled people must be consulted to ensure that the service will meet identified needs and be entirely accessible
- Recommendation 6 – In drawing up the contract for a new Community Transport service, the needs of service users must be explicitly prioritised in the event of any service delivery issues or contract failure, and bureaucracy associated with the operation of the contract should be minimised wherever possible
- Recommendation 7 – A strategy should be developed to effectively promote a reinstated Community Transport service among key potential client groups.

Cllr Stephen Fenton
Cllr Jane Burton
Cllr Chris Steward

14 June 2024