

**North Yorkshire Council
Skipton & Ripon Constituency Committee – 1 June 2023
YorBus pilot project**

1.0 Purpose of the Report

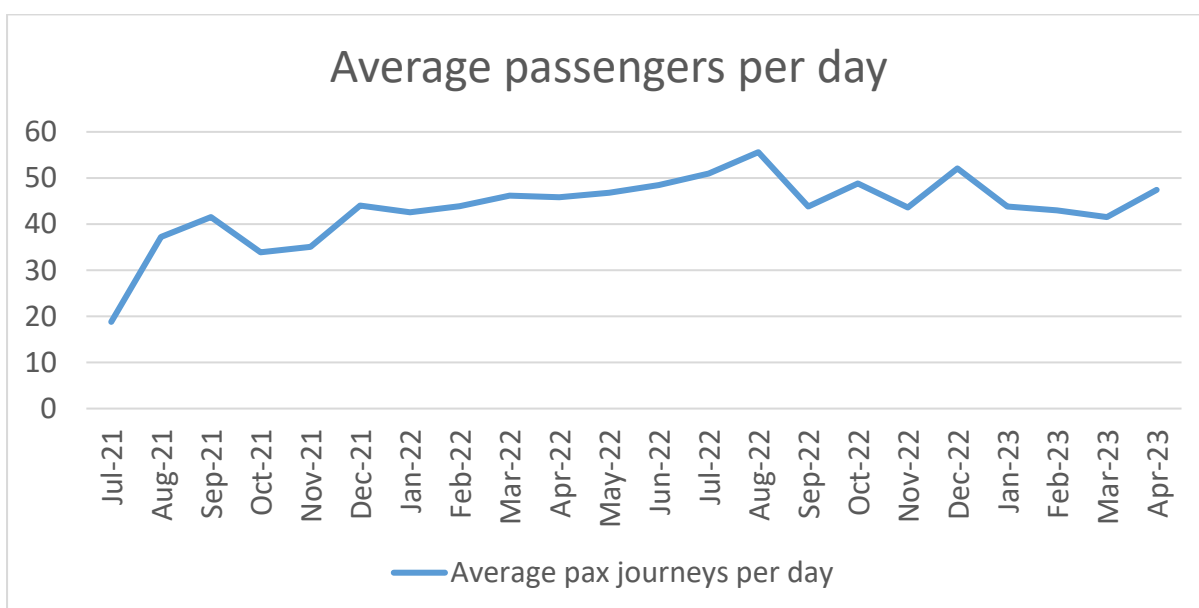
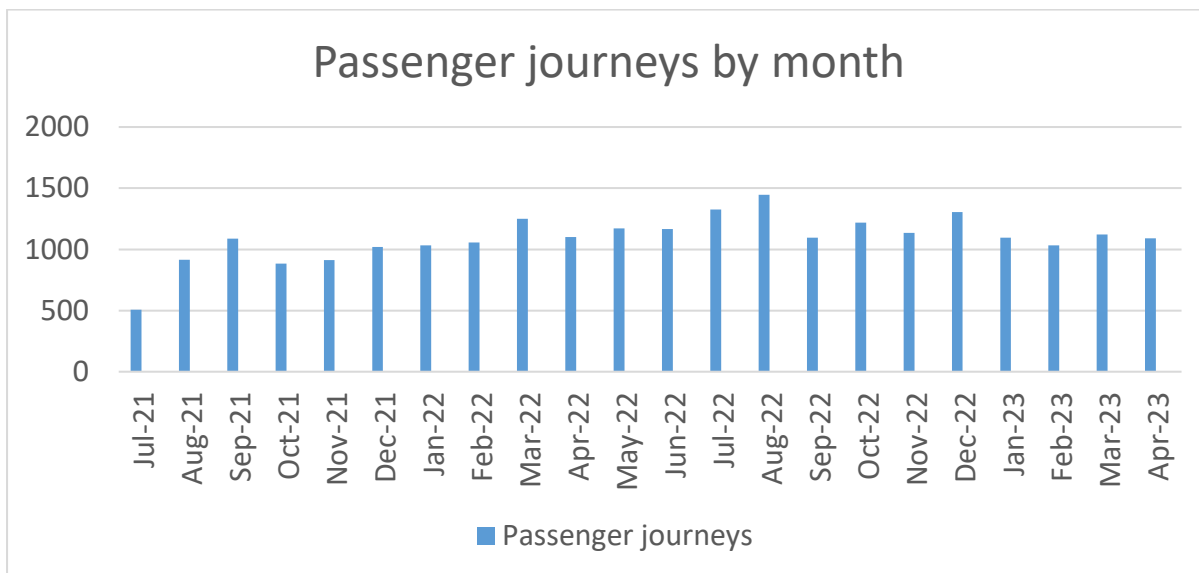
- 1.1 To update the committee on the YorBus pilot Digital Demand Responsive Bus Service which will end on 30 June 2023.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 YorBus is a digital on-demand bus service connecting Ripon, Masham, Bedale and surrounding villages. It is a flexible transport service, where transport is shared, and vehicles use software to vary their routes within a defined operating area based on customer demand rather than using a fixed route or timetable.
- 2.2 The service started in July 2021, initially as a 12 month pilot project and then extended to operate for a second year up to 30 June 2023.
- 2.3 A bid was submitted to the Rural Mobility Fund to fund the project, but this was unsuccessful and the YorBus pilot has been funded by the Council.
- 2.4 The service is run with two 14 seater, wheelchair accessible buses using the Council's "in house" fleet vehicles and staff resource; operating from 06:55 to 18:00 Monday to Friday, and 09:00 to 18:00 on Saturdays and covering a largely rural area of 217km². A map of the operating area is included below (Annex A).
- 2.5 Customers book journeys on the bus via the dedicated YorBus app or through the Customer Service Centre, with the option to pre-book journeys up to a day in advance added from 1 August 2022.
- 2.6 Fares were originally set at £1.20 for adults, 65p for a child and then increased from the start of August 2022 to £2:00 and £1:00 respectively. Customers with a concessionary bus pass can travel for free within concessionary bus pass hours.

3.0 Performance of YorBus during the pilot

- 3.1 The graphs below show that passenger numbers grew steadily during the first year of the pilot, peaking in August 2022 but since then numbers using YorBus have levelled off.



- 3.2 A particular challenge has been improving the efficiency of YorBus and increasing the number of passengers per trip made. A fixed route bus service is designed to pick up many passengers along a set route towards a common destination but a demand responsive service is flexible and allows passengers to choose their own start and finish points.
- 3.3 Despite making changes to how rides are booked to encourage greater aggregation (allowing routes and times to be varied slightly to pick up multiple passengers on a journey) the average number of passengers per hour hasn't increased; averaging at 2.4 passengers per hour over the last 6 months. This is an issued also reported by other similar schemes around the country.
- 3.4 Pre-bookings accounts for around 40% of all bookings, with most riders booking up to 3 hours in advance and over 90% of bookings being made through the mobile app.

- 3.5 YorBus passenger data suggests that the service has attracted different types of bus user, often younger, fare paying adults rather than older concessionary bus pass users who form a higher proportion of passengers on fixed route rural buses. This is likely a combination of the flexibility of the service, coupled with the ease of booking via an app.
- 3.6 Feedback from customers has been positive and the high levels of customer satisfaction are reflected in the number of repeat passengers using the service. User experience figures have remained high throughout the pilot with the average ride rating by passengers consistently at 4.7 stars out of 5, or higher.

4.0 Finance

- 4.1 The net cost of running YorBus in 2022/23 (April 22 – March 23) was £224,000. The service carried 14,208 passengers at an average cost per passenger of £15.57 across the year. Although this reached as low as £12.43 last August it is now around £14. This is significantly higher than that for fixed timetable bus routes in the area which are around £6.50 per passenger.
- 4.2 Discussions with councils operating other digital on-demand schemes show similar or higher costs elsewhere. Most other schemes are being funded by grants from central government, either through the Rural Mobility Fund or via Bus Service Improvement Plan support.
- 4.3 Options to roll out the Demand Responsive service more widely, potentially replacing existing bus routes, have been considered but the high cost involved means that only some areas would receive a service without significant additional funding being added to the bus support budget.
- 4.4 Last year, the county council was unsuccessful in its bid for £116 million to invest in bus services in the Government's Bus Back Better scheme. In total, just 34 of 79 areas which applied were successful. If we had been successful with our bid, part of the funding would have been earmarked for the possible expansion of YorBus across North Yorkshire.

5.0 Conclusion of the pilot project and next steps

- 5.1 Without sufficient additional funding being available to expand the service so YorBus can benefit residents across North Yorkshire, and with costs per journey remaining so high despite efforts to improve value for money, the pilot will come to an end as planned at the end of June.
- 5.2 A Communications Plan is in place and passengers have been advised of the end of the pilot and alternative travel options which includes other bus services in the area as well as information on community transport providers for those who find accessing local buses more difficult.
- 5.3 After the pilot concludes a more detailed "lessons learned" report will be compiled, and the data gathered from running the pilot scheme will be used to help shape our public transport provision in the future.

5.4 The buses and drivers will continue to deliver other services operated by North Yorkshire Council.

6.0 Recommendation

6.1 The Committee is asked to note the information in this report.

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Annex A: map showing area covered by YorBus pilot scheme.

