

## **York Bus Forum Meeting Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> December 2022 17.30 by Zoom**

**Attending;** Doreen Magill (Chair), Graham Collett (Vice Chair), Dave Merrett, Roger French (Finance and Membership), Flick Williams, Tom Bridge (First), Kevin Fradley, Robert Williams (Speaker), Ian Anderson, Stephen Dunthorne, Dr. Chris Fletcher, Councillor Andy D'Agorne, Glen Simpson, Terry French, Catherine Odell, Diana Robinson, Eden Blyth, Jim – Harbus, John Slaughter, David Stuart, George Wood, Tony Hudson, John Bibby, Alan Robinson, Duncan Millar, George Wood, Lionel Lennox and Mary Fairbrother.

1. Chair welcomed attendees and reported apologies from Niall McFerran, Dee Boyle, Richard Parker, Michael Howard, Jason Murgatroyd and Gail Shuttleworth.

2. Guest Speaker Mr. Robert Williams, Chief Executive , Reading Buses explained that Reading Buses were not run by the Council but owned by an arm's length company essentially owned by the Council as the major shareholder and as such were the only Municipal Bus Company in England outside London.

Reading Bus Company had over the years extended their range of operations, partly by acquisitions, such that they now operated beyond the Borough into rural areas, Wokingham Borough (which included itself parts of the Reading urban area) , to cover Newbury and District and the Thames Valley.

Reading buses pre-pandemic had a history of increased passenger journeys and increased turnover, partly as a result of the acquisitions but also a result of the increasing population of Reading.

Reading having a compact centre there was practically no more room for cars and there had as a result been an increased number of bus journeys to the centre and increased number of journeys per head of population which had increased from 102.7 in 2012/13 to 137.15 in 2019/20 the third highest in England .

Since covid Reading buses as a whole had recovered to 80% of pre-pandemic levels, a little below the English average primarily due to the changed work patterns with fewer residents commuting to London daily and a resultant reduction in their journeys to Reading rail station.

However, Mr Williams was confident that the Bus Company, having adjusted its services and timetables accordingly, was now in a stable position to move forward, even without government support should it end on 31<sup>st</sup> March, and in a position to expand further in the future.

Mr Williams highlighted the following factors as the reasons for the Company's success: The strength of the local economy; the frequency and reliability of services, the quality of the Bus fleet and passenger experience, competitive pricing, having a coherent bus company strategy and plan, and a keen awareness of local factors.

On the latter point Mr. Williams thought that being a Municipal Bus Company was a benefit as it allowed a greater local focus rather than working in a bus company operating on a national basis, and buses were branded to route level and regarded by users as "our buses", and he felt that engaging with the public locally allowed a greater understanding of the local decision making processes.

Being a Municipal Bus Company had also engendered a passionate, committed workforce and all profits were returned into improving services rather than having to provide a return on investment to shareholders.

Mr. Williams then ran through the extensive range of audio visual options to keep bus passengers informed both at bus stops and on the buses themselves and highlighted the development of the bus app featuring live times, service updates, timetables, journey planning, things to do i.e. local reasons to travel.

He also acknowledged the value of traditional paper based timetables which were widely available throughout the area of Reading buses operations.

Turning to the fleet Mr. Williams noted that the Reading Bus Fleet was a mixture of bio-gas vehicles (60 vehicles) and EURO VI compliant diesel vehicles (88 vehicles).

All of the gas was sourced from sustainable waste sources locally such as local farms but he said that the Company had decided not to increase numbers using bio-gas at the moment as they were mid-life and to take any out of service there would be no second market for selling on the vehicles.

He indicated that the Bus Company was deliberating how to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030 and offered the opinion that electric vehicles were the future though Reading buses had been unsuccessful in obtaining Zebra funding.

Since the pandemic Reading had concentrated on refurbishing older vehicles introducing facilities such as wireless charging and usb points but he was confident that they would soon be in a position to recommence their programme plans to replace 10% of vehicles per annum.

Turning his attention to the sister companies that Reading has acquired he emphasised the importance of branding attuned to the local area that they served, and local management teams to drive their progress locally.

Mr Williams showed pictures of a number of branded buses including one with striping to highlight the climate emergency which gradually showed the progress from green to red on its stripes over time which had been very effective in bringing awareness of the climate emergency.

Reading and its sister companies were adopting the £2 fare cap and working on other fare initiatives including heavily discounted day tickets.

Finally Mr. Williams said that £16m. funding was being invested locally to providing more bus lanes to keep the buses on time.

Questions: Doreen M asked about the maintenance profile of bio- gas vehicles compared to others and Mr. Williams responded that the maintenance pattern was different to diesel but more or less the same overall impact up to the mid-life point that the bio-gas vehicles were at but the only downside the inability to sell on as others don't have the facilities to use the vehicles.

EB offered the opinion that it was a tragedy that the law prevented other municipal companies being formed but if he could only operate in an Enhanced Partnership (EP) or franchising scenario which would Reading choose and M. Williams stated unequivocally an EP as he believed it would allow the benefits achievable through public/private partnerships.

FW asked what proportion of the fleet had electronic ramps to which Mr Williams replied 0% since he believed that the manual operation of ramps by the driver was more reliable

and no more time-consuming than electric and he went on to explain that all Reading vehicles have 2 wheelchair spaces and repeater screens in the wheelchair area that explained which stops were coming up as the main screens in the buses were located in advance of the wheelchair area.

KF asked about the pension arrangements for employees and Mr Williams said that there are 3 pension schemes. The first emanated from pre- 1986 and reflected the local government pension scheme of the time and only 9 employees were left on that scheme, the second was introduced post -1986 with private pensions introduced as a result of the then government scheme and the third was introduced more recently which was essentially a pay as you go scheme with lower benefits than the previous two schemes.

KF also asked what happens when vehicles branded to a particular route fail- Mr. Williams said that whilst no system is perfect they had a number of generic buses and one of those would normally be deployed.

KF asked what time concessionary fares commenced in Reading. Mr. Williams indicated that in Reading it was 9.00am but disabled concessions could be used anytime, whilst in other areas where they operated it depended on the local authority area- in Wokingham and West Berkshire for instance was 9.30am.

Doreen M picked up questions from the chat facility and Mr. Williams indicated that all of the major bus operators apart from Stagecoach had some presence in the area of operations covered by Reading and its sister companies. Asked about fares he said a day ticket was £4.50 but 10p cheaper if bought on the app and there was a weekly £17 ticket and a range of short hop fares- some of which were less expensive than the minimum £2 government scheme.

Mr. Williams was thanked for a very comprehensive and informative presentation and discussion.

### 3. Minutes of the meeting of 20<sup>th</sup> December 2022

The minutes were agreed as a correct record.

#### 3.1 Matters arising

MH had submitted apologies for the meeting but provided a written update- attached to these minutes.

The update cleared item 3.1.2 and the commitment to 2 wheelchair spaces, on board screens, on board public address systems etc. were welcome additions.

GC was able to update members that York had today (17<sup>th</sup>) been awarded Zebra funding for a further 10 Zebra vehicles which was also positive news.

The invitation (circulated separately) to the City Centre bus shuttle options presentation was also positively received with a number of members expressing their intention to attend over the weekend.

FW explained that she had attended a consultation meeting on behalf of YBF which had outlined 3 potential types of vehicle and 6 potential loop routes all of which would be on display.

Matters arising 3.1.1 and 3.1.3 will be held over to the next meeting awaiting an update.

### 4. Update on tender No 12 service

MH's update indicated a temporary contract running from 23/01/2023 to 31/03/2023 and GC was able to inform members that the service would be hourly and operated by Transdev.

GC also informed members that a new tender will be put out by City of York Council to operate the 12 service from 1 April 2023 onwards.

Further GC informed members that the Dodsworth Area Residents Association had called a public meeting on 28<sup>th</sup> January 2023 to discuss the future of the No 12 service and he would be attending on behalf of YBF, possibly with other committee members.

#### 5. £2 Fare publicity -First Group.

TB had liaised with commercial colleagues in First Group having been conscious of the perception that there had been relatively little publicity of the £2 fare compared to some other operators- Transdev having specifically been mentioned by some YBF members. He said that publicity had been targeted through the bus adventures section of the First Group app, on twitter, U tube and instagram to try and reach potential users from sections of society that didn't use the traditional methods of information and this may have been the reason First appeared less active but he hoped that First will now be reaching people by both traditional and social media means.

Doreen M commented that, as a regular bus user, she had seen advertising for the fare on bus timetable displays but only regular bus users would be likely to see that publicity.

FW observed that she had seen some evidence of slower journey boarding times due to lack of awareness of the fares and discussion with drivers as to available fares and DM encouraged the introduction of a £4 day ticket though it was acknowledged that the government scheme would not fund such an offer.

TB was happy to take other observations on First Services and GC commented that the new timetable for the no 10 service at 35 minute intervals was felt to be unsatisfactory by users of the service and lead to difficult timings e.g. 1 minute to or past the hour. It was generally felt that every 40 minutes, equating to 3 services in 2 hours and relatively easy to remember timings e.g. stating at 00, 40 and 10 minutes would be preferable.

TB explained that First the reason for the scheduling as it was, was availability of resources to give a stable situation given current available driver numbers and First used a computerised scheduling system but he undertook to feedback comments received.

TB also confirmed that the Poppleton Bar Park and Ride was due to re-open the first week in April, news that was positively received by members. He expressed concerns about passenger numbers at certain times of day and on certain days.

RF suggested that re-introducing additional stops on evenings for instance on the no 3 route, would boost passenger numbers and encourage more evening travel.

#### 6. Christmas/ New Year Services

The paper circulated prior to the meeting was briefly discussed and RF thanked JM, who couldn't make the meeting due to a prior engagement, for bringing the issue to attention.

RF explained that subject to agreement of members the paper, which had been discussed and agreed at the last committee meeting, would be submitted to the late February meeting of the Enhanced Partnership Forum attended by GC on behalf of YBF.

#### 7. Decarbonising Transport event at the Yorkshire Philosophical Society 15<sup>th</sup> February 2023.

Notification of this event had been circulated with the agenda and any interested members were encouraged to book for this free event.

## 8. Any other business

8.1 Coastliner petition- IA raised the topic of the petition to try and maintain the Malton- Whitby Coastliner service that Transdev had given to notice to withdraw. IA encouraged YBF to formally oppose the closure.

Doreen M said that the Committee had discussed and all members of the committee had signed the petition individually and encouraged individual members of a similar view to sign. IA asked for the address of the petition to be circulated and Doreen M pointed out that it could easily be “googled”.

GC committed to YBF taking the issue up with Transdev at the next Transdev/YBF forum meeting.

## 8.2 Flooding in Nether Poppleton

LL explained that when flooding occurs in Nether Poppleton buses cannot run the full route through the village to the terminus at the Lord Nelson pub. However, they use an alternative stop in Millfield Lane but there is no terminus or timed stop in Millfield Lane. When the bus arrives early at the Lord Nelson it should wait until the correct time (though on occasion doesn't) but on the alternative route, with no timed stop, the bus often leaves early and passengers miss the bus.

Whilst acknowledging that this issue only occurs when there is flooding LL suggested there should be an acknowledged terminus stop when flooding occurs with known timings.

This issue affects both First Bus who run the evening service and First who run the day service.

GC suggested including as a matter arising for the agenda for the next meeting but also agreed to write to the companies concerned.

Dave M suggested an electronic indicator board should be installed at the Lord Nelson stop but it was acknowledged that it would still require drivers' to wait until the stated leaving time.

FW pointed out that when Stonegate gets flooded the No 3 diverts from Blossom Street to Nunnery Lane missing the Rail Station there is no notice to this effect on the bus or announcement by the driver which could cause passengers to miss trains.

It was agreed this matter should also be raised by GC

## 9. **Date of next meeting** Tuesday February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2023 at 5.30p.m. by zoom