

The lunatics take over the asylum – A case study of an innovative approach to the provision and operation of a leisure bus network in the Yorkshire Dales

To most visitors to the British countryside, the car is the default mode of travel, and sadly the perception that it is the only option that visitors ever use, and the only one that matters is also shared by the majority of countryside managers, tourist site operators and politicians. A bus is something you gave up using when you left school, a car is adulthood, independence, personal freedom. The Car is King. Even where rural bus services do exist, for most people who have access to their own car, buses are just an irritation, something that delays you when driving in a hurry along narrow roads.

Contrary to popular mythology, rural Britain is in fact served by surprisingly good weekday networks of bus services to most larger villages and between villages and market towns.

But on Sundays and Bank Holidays, still the most popular days for a trip to the countryside, the very days when traffic congestion can be worst in most popular tourist areas and leisure destinations, buses are least in evidence. If you don't have a car, or wish to avoid that congestion, Sundays are often one the day of the week you can't travel into the countryside by bus because local rural transport and connecting services are so poor.

Yet 25% of households in the UK - 1 in 4 of our citizens - do not actually have access to a car – (DfT Transport Trends 2007). This very large minority includes younger people, people on lower incomes, older people, as well as people who for whatever reason cannot or choose not to drive. This means when there is no transport available, such people are effectively excluded from the countryside. People who don't drive still contribute through their taxes and community charges to the cost of National Parks, AONBs, Heritage Coasts and even, through tax relief schemes such as Gift Aid, to charitable organisations such as the National Trust. Many overseas visitors - relative high spenders in the rural economy - also rely on public transport when they come to the UK.

If we believe that the countryside is truly for all, not just the affluent and mobile, there is a serious problem here, a glaring gap between rhetoric and reality. .

But it is worse than just social exclusion. Visitors' cars create the most intrusive and damaging impacts of tourist activity in the UK countryside. A third of all car journeys and 40% of mileage are leisure related, (DTLGR 2001) with over 95% of all journeys to most National Parks and AONBs being car-based. These are large numbers.

This avalanche of metal and tyres has a massive environmental impact in terms of congestion both on motorways and main roads leading to our popular areas and on minor roads within those areas, visual blight also caused by huge parking lots or lines of roadside parking, intrusive traffic noise imposed on rural communities, accidents (and constant fear of accidents especially to pedestrians, cyclists and wild life), and a huge carbon footprint. We have calculated that recreational visitor traffic to the Yorkshire Dales generates at least 48,000 tonnes of CO₂ per annum- the equivalent of a very large industrial plant or small power station (TFL 2008). Switching just 10% of traffic to greener modes of travel would therefore save 4,800 tonnes of CO₂ – in a more rational world this would be the highest priority for countryside managers concerned about a sustainable future for the planet.

Providing and promoting green networks of public transport, walking and cycling routes as an alternative to the pollution and environmentally damaging car should therefore seen to be top priority for any right thinking conservation body. Sustainable access to the countryside and environmental protection of that countryside are, or should be, core, fundamental purpose for the managers of protected landscapes such as National Parks, AONBs or Heritage Coasts. That's precisely why such areas were established by successive Governments.

But reality is somewhat different. Through what can best be described as a combination of indifference and self-interest – decision-takers themselves perhaps sub-consciously wanting to protect their own unrestricted right to drive their cars – public transport access is too often the very lowest priority in budgets, or, just as perniciously, labelled as someone else's

problem. Green strategies abound – every Management Plan exudes pious statements about developing walking, cycling and public transport. But when it comes to determining actual budgets, recreational public transport in particular is an inevitable, starving Cinderella.

It's a Catch 22 situation. In the Yorkshire Dales, a magnificent National Park less than half an hour's journey from one of the most densely populated conurbations in Northern England, the National Park Authority, with a budget of almost £5 million per annum, cut its budget in 2007 for the provision and promotion of public transport to zero. At the same time North Yorkshire County Council and West Yorkshire PTE began to reduce unprofitable Sunday rural bus services, even where they were well used. For the transport authorities weekend "leisure" services are a low priority, judged to be the responsibility of the National Park Authority, despite the huge importance of rural tourism to the economy, and the immense value of access and outdoor exercise in the nearby countryside, in terms of the mental and physical health of both urban and rural communities and in the fight against car-dependent obesity.

Things came to a head in the Yorkshire Dales in July 2006 when a key public transport link between Ilkley and Skipton, both towns on the edge of the Yorkshire Dales National Park with a combined population of around 40,000 – lost their direct bus services on evenings and Sundays. This meant significant loss of access to the National Park for these and other communities in West and North Yorkshire. Worse, further proposed budget cuts together with loss of Countryside Agency funding – in 2006 most committed CA rural leisure bus funding disappeared into the "black hole" of the Regional Development Agencies - meant that the whole of the popular Dalesbus Sunday leisure network was now under threat, despite its major contribution to the local rural economy from day and staying visitors. When letter writing to MPs, councillors, the press failed to produce results, it was recognised by two key local environmental groups, the Yorkshire Dales Society (a registered charity), and the Yorkshire Dales Public Transport Users Group (a campaigning group) that radical action to change the situation was needed.

In February 2007, the first step by the two bodies was to set up the **Dales & Bowland Community Interest Company**, a form of Social Enterprise Company, technically owned by the Yorkshire Dales Society. A CIC is "asset locked" meaning that profits can only be used to pursue its agreed objectives or benefit its parent charity. The D&B CIC is structured to have three of its seven Directors from among Trustees of the Yorkshire Dales Society, two from the Yorkshire Dales Public Transport User Group and two independent experts in rural transport and tourism. All Directors give their time free of charge. The YDS and its board of Trustees retain overall a single Golden Share which is used to approve, or otherwise, the Annual Report.

The first task was to rescue the lost X84 Sunday service which we did so by tapping into the Yorkshire Dales National Park Sustainable Development Fund – a £20,000 project to operate and market a replacement two hourly bus Sunday service between Skipton and Ilkley – promoted as **Cravenlink** - but also serving Bolton Abbey in the Yorkshire Dales National Park, and also a limited Sunday service (814) from Bradford to the popular tourist village of Malham, otherwise inaccessible on a Sunday except by car. Guided walks aimed at people from urban communities were also provided from both services, and the entire project branded as **Sharing the Dales** to emphasise the fact that we were aiming at people who because of transport problems and other difficulties could not normally access the National Park. We also worked closely with the Council for National Park's **Mosaic** project to attract ethnic minorities from Keighley and Bradford onto the buses and guided walks.

Both services were extremely successful, with over 3,500 passenger journeys on a short season, with an average of 7 passengers per service on the Cravenlink and more than double that on the 814, and an encouraging average of 10 participants on each of 30 Sharing the Dales guided walks. This was despite one of the wettest summers for over 40 years. So far so good.

But in 2008 we found there were to be yet further cuts in Sunday bus services as yet more funding was withdrawn, and by early 2008 it looked as if the whole summer Dales Bus network was about to collapse. Then, at the very last minute – March 2008 – in a sudden and

welcome change of heart, North Yorkshire County Council offered the CIC £13,000 to run what "residual" Dalesbus services we could in Wharfedale and Wensleydale. Unexpectedly, and to our delight West Yorkshire PTE (Metro), then also suddenly found us £7,000 towards the Cravenlink bus service. And then as late as May – when some services were already under way, finally an offer came of £15,000 from the National Park Authority as part of their better than expected Government financial settlement – still only a minute fraction of their total budget, but nevertheless most welcome. This made it possible for us to offer a core network of services in Wharfedale, Wensleydale and to Malhamdale, including the innovative 808 bus which linked with trains from the Settle-Carlisle line at Ribbleshead and the 874 Wharfedale service from Ilkley at Buckden. So we now had a Dalesbus network in being. But we had to work flat out to with operators to agree routes, prices and timetables with operators, to get service registered and get publicity out. Late publicity was a serious disadvantage despite all our efforts. Teams of volunteers were out and about erecting timetables at every available bus stop and distributing leaflets along all route corridors. It has been no mean effort and one which continues with our autumn and winter services which we've managed to operate on at least some of the network.

But it was also great to receive support from other bodies - £1,500 from the Friends of Settle-Carlisle line, £500 from two local CPRE branches, £500 from a private tourist business, the owner of How Stean caves in Upper Nidderdale.

Then as late as June 2008 we had confirmation of yet further funding of £6k from North Yorkshire CC and £7k from the Nidderdale SDF to operate and market a network of services in Nidderdale AONB, direct from Leeds, Otley and Harrogate to Upper Nidderdale, Fountains Abbey, Pateley Bridge, Leyburn and Richmond.

Other innovative ideas followed – the use of a returning empty special school bus between Harrogate, Pateley Bridge for a local shopping service from Threshfield and Grassington and Harrogate and Ripon, and in partnership with Natural England, a new minibus service – dubbed the Ingleborough Pony - service 888 serving the National Nature Reserve with links to and from stations on the Settle-Carlisle line and offering an innovative park, ride and walk facility for walkers across Ingleborough from the car parks along the A65 on edge of the National Park.

Critical has been the success of our efforts to draw in cash from various sources to market new and existing services in the Forest of Bowland, in Nidderdale AONB and the Yorkshire Dales, and to set up our own monitoring systems to ensure feedback into the future planning of the network. This is not always easy with some of the small rural operators we are working with.

But the good news is that on two of the services, Cravenlink and the Wharfedale we can demonstrate spectacular growth rates of 40%, and whilst late publicity has handicapped the new Nidderdale and Wensleydale services, they were, even in a wet summer, well up to expectations. In total we anticipate 14,000 passenger journeys on our Dales Bus network – still a drop in the ocean compared with car journeys, but a notable success nonetheless. If we get sufficient funding next year, we believe we can increase this figure by 45%.

The CIC is a bold experiment, borne out of failure and crisis. It has brought together the public, voluntary and private sectors, and has been able to harness a lot of energy, expertise and dedication by particular individuals, which have been supported financially by the public and private sectors to a degree which was not anticipated. This was welcome.

Our strengths have been:

- A team of dedicated volunteers who believe in the product
- Commitment and dedication
- Ability to act quickly and with minimal bureaucracy.
- Trust of local authorities to work with asset-locked not-for-profit body
- Success story and proven skills in partnership working
- The "X" factor and will to win

Our weaknesses however reflect the fact that the overall situation is vulnerable to lack of repeat funding commitments, and basic problems remain unchanged:

- Local authorities, RDA, Countryside managers happy to write “green” strategies but not to fight for resources to deliver
- The car culture still dominates decision makers who drive everywhere and don’t believe in buses, trains, cycling or walking
- Volunteers can soon lose heart or find other causes to support
- Only very short term commitments; without real cash on the table the project dies
- “Not my problem” attitude still too prevalent in official bodies.

Unless we can achieve the miracle we achieved in 2008 again in 2009 in terms of getting significant funding packages together, the whole enterprise will be at risk. Worst, short term last minute funding decisions based on “left over” cash at the end of the financial year, reduces time available for marketing with drastic impacts on patronage if, despite all our efforts with leaflets and web sites, we can’t get the publicity out to people in time. This late delivery has a massive negative impact on revenue and on value for money.

But ultimately there is a longer term agenda. The CIC is about demonstrating that transport is not marginal to sustainable tourism and rural recreation, but central and integral to the delivery of key outputs. All tourist activity is transport-based activity, and all transport has an impact on the environment. So called “Green” or sustainable tourism has least travel impacts, but offers maximum benefits in terms of health and quality of experience for participants and for local host communities.

“Slow Travel” - on foot, by bike, by rural bus or train – is also about quality of experience, respecting diversity, appreciating the scale, the complexity of a landscape or natural heritage. It lies at the heart of sustainable tourism provision and sustainable visitor management in any protected or heritage landscape.

One important recent development is that the CIC is now working closely with the Yorkshire Dales & Harrogate Tourism Partnership to promote sustainable travel opportunities to tourism destinations, and to work with visitor attractions on the wider green travel agenda, an initiative given a huge boost and incentive by the award of Europarc Charter for Sustainable Tourism, status the Yorkshire Dales National Park and Nidderdale AONB now share with the Forest of Bowland AONB .

But the CIC model is all about putting the user – the visitor, the walker, the local resident – in the driving seat. It is we, the walkers, who decide when the bus should run and along what route.

The Community Interest Company model – and the exact form and role for a CIC could take many variants according to individual circumstance and individual skills available – is just one, albeit innovative way, of achieving this and overcoming some of the institutional failures and lack of imagination all too prevalent in current rural leisure transport provision to and within protected landscapes in the UK at present time.

But it also can be a way of sharing and realising objectives with other green travel and sustainable tourism stakeholders, including local authorities and National Park and AONB managers. It can be used as a way of developing joint projects, and building new support mechanism to acquire project funding for green travel and tourism networks to serve both local communities and their visitors.

So the lunatics, in the Yorkshire Dales at least, may have found a way, if not of getting out of the asylum, at least of taking it over.

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