

2022 Annual Report from High Suffolk Community Bus Ltd.

Bus Service

Service resumed on 20th July last year with Covid precautions in place on the bus which continues to provide a vital service to the 7 parishes.

The routes covered currently, are to Framlingham, Stowmarket, Diss, Ipswich, Norwich, Bury St Edmunds & Lowestoft. At this time we have resumed very limited private hire but have insufficient drivers to increase this.

Passenger numbers were initially very low but have been picking up and whilst Up until March we were seeing about two thirds by number of passengers when compared to 2019, pre Covid and have continued to pick up.

This overall increase hides the fact that passenger numbers for the Ipswich service have been extremely poor been since restarting in July 2021, with 5 of the 9 Saturday runs since then being empty and 3 of the last 10 Wednesday runs also empty. Those buses that have had passengers have tended to have very low numbers resulting in an average of only 1 passenger for the Saturday run and 3.7 passengers on the Wednesday runs.

We receive no subsidies and the Covid Bus Service Support Grant is being phased out this year. Although we are a non-profit organisation we must earn sufficient income to keep the bus on the road and fund future bus replacement and the very low passengers mean that the Ipswich service is not sustainable.

We conducted a community survey recently to gather information on the demand for Ipswich services and reasons why it was not being used

The survey responses confirmed that there is no demand for our Ipswich service. In the light of this and the very low numbers on the Saturday Ipswich run the will cease. The process for ceasing takes about 10 weeks to process via County Council and Dept. of Transport so this service is expected to cease by August this year. To sustain the bus we do need to make an income from running services so we plan to replace this Saturday Ipswich destination with a service to Woodbridge later in the year, subject to approval by the authorities..

The Ipswich Wednesday service to continue to end of July to allow more time for passenger numbers to increase. We will review the situation in August and if necessary will take steps to cease that service as well.

Replacement Bus

A replacement bus was ordered on 3rd March, it will have a number of features that will assist the driver and contribute to general safety such as: automatic transmission, heated windscreen reversing camera, rear window wash wipe, non-slip side step. The overall price was within our financial means at the time of ordering.

On 5th April, Mercedes informed us that there was a 6% across the board increase in the prices of all of their vehicles due to skyrocketing prices increases in raw materials triggered by the war Ukraine.

The Committee decided to go with the increase as restarting the order process would gain nothing as prices are only expected to continue increasing for the foreseeable future. This means that we are now seeking additional funds to cover the increase.

Delivery of the new bus will be during September at the earliest, but may well late this year and possible into next year.

Donations

We would like to record our sincere thanks to

Bedingfield Land Charities Charities

Bedfield Town Estates

Monk Soham Townlands Trust

Southholt Townland Trust

For their greatly valued donations during last year.

Donations, from parishes, trusts and from passengers donating on-board are an important part of our funding, helping to cover running costs and replacement bus fund; we only get reimbursed 75% of our fares foregone by the County Councils concessionary fares schemes, which applies to around 90% of our passengers carried.

Additionally we received a £2000 grant from Suffolk County Council towards the purchase cost of the new bus.

Fares

When we restarted last year fares were held at the pre Covid (2018) level to encourage potential new passengers, this we could do due to receiving the CBSSG the purpose of which was to compensate for reduced passenger numbers.

As previously mentioned the CBSSG support grants which covered our ongoing running costs of the bus since we restarted are being phased down this year

Our running costs are rising significantly e.g. fuel, maintenance etc.

Therefore we have no choice but to raise fares in the New Year. For the vast majority of our passengers who make use of the concessionary fare scheme the bus will remain free to use. We will announce the actual rise later this year once we have considered it fully.

Drivers

We rely totally on volunteer drivers. We have an excellent team of active drivers but there are only 7 at this time. We are only able to run our full timetable because our volunteer drivers are willing to do several runs per month.

There is no slack and should a driver become unavailable for any reason (illness, long holiday etc.).

Despite making several new driver appeals since last year in various media we have had no responses whatsoever.

We need at least 2 more volunteer drivers to come forward from the community to allow us to continue to reliably run the services.

If we cannot obtain any additional volunteer drivers then we will most likely be faced with having to cancel service at short notice and ultimately withdraw services.

Parking the Bus

Last autumn we are asked to relocate the bus from its previous parking location by the landowners. We were having difficulty in identifying a suitable alternative when along came Worlingworth Cricket Club who were able to

offer us parking in their grounds, where we have happily done so since last October. We remain very grateful to the club for this and wish to record our thanks accordingly.

Summary

In summary we are seeing recovery from the Covid lockdown in terms of passenger numbers but in the current climate of rising costs we have to manage our running costs and cease unsustainable services. We should have a new bus in due course but we really need a more volunteers from the community to join us to ensure the continuation of what is considered by many to be a valued community service.

The High Suffolk Community Transport Management Committee