

2024 Annual Report from High Suffolk Community Bus Ltd.

To Parish Councils

Bus Service

Unsolicited passenger feedback confirms that our community bus continues to provide a much valued and appreciated service to the local communities.

We continue to provide regulars Services to Framlingham, Stowmarket, Diss, Norwich and Bury St Edmunds.

It requires at least 6 passengers per trip just to cover the operating costs (fuel, maintenance, insurance etc.).

In April this year the Woodbridge service was withdrawn very poor support despite it having been the most request route, often having just two or even zero passengers.

Low passenger numbers have been a cause for concern with the Stowmarket service, if numbers continue to be insufficient then this service will have to be ceased also. We are investigating alternative destinations of Saxmundham and Martlesham.

The change of the Diss service to go via Wilby and Stradbroke has continued to be very successful with this now being a very well supported service.

The monthly Saturday service to Norwich was also re-routed via Wilby and Stradbroke and as a result has had a significant increase in passenger numbers, without which it would likely have had to be withdrawn.

90% of our income is derived from passengers, fares and on board donations. 90% of our passengers use of the concessionary fare scheme which gives free travel to bus pass holders but reimburses us at around $\frac{3}{4}$ of the cash fare. A small number of passengers pay cash fares.

The other 10% of our income is from donations from a small number of local 'townland' trusts.

We receive no subsidies from any authorities and whilst we are a non-profit organisation we do have to earn sufficient income to keep the bus on the road and fund future bus replacement. This is why we cannot sustain services that are poorly supported, if we make a loss on a service there is no way for us to make up the shortfall from elsewhere.

Our other opportunity to earn income is that of Private Hire but we have been unable to undertake any this year due to lack of drivers.

Overall passenger numbers remain at about 85% of pre Covid level which translates to an approximate 15% reduction in our total income which coincides with significantly increased operating costs.

Replacement Bus

A replacement bus was finally delivered on 26th May 2023. It is an automatic drive and is a lot less strenuous to drive than the old bus. It also gives a smoother rides for passengers we are told.

Fares

Our running costs have stabilised over last year, due to reduced maintenance costs and a reduction in fuel costs since the previous year. This allowed us to hold fares at last year's prices.

It is likely that we will have to raise fares again in the future, especially if usage of the bus does not increase.

Drivers

We rely totally on a pool of volunteer drivers. We currently have an excellent team of 7 active drivers. Being an excellent dedicated set of volunteer drivers we are currently able to run all of our timetabled services but there is no slack and should a driver become unavailable for any reason (e.g. illness, long holiday etc.) that we may be faced with cancelling services at short notice.

Despite making several appeals to the community over the last couple of years there has been very little response. The few responses received from people who unfortunately no longer held a valid driving licence for a minibus. We really need some more volunteer drivers to come forward from the community over the next year or two if we are to continue to reliably run our services into the future. If we cannot achieve this then the regulations under which we are obliged to operate require us to permanently reduce the service to a level that we can operate reliably to published timetables; this will ultimately mean that the bus will not be financially sustainable in the long term.

Management Committee

There is a great deal of work that we are obliged to undertake behind the scene, for various regulatory and official bodies, in order to keep the bus operating.

Committee vacancies have remain unfilled, despite appeals, for several years. We do not have capacity on the committee for any cover should a committee member be unable to perform their role; this could ultimately lead to loss of the bus if we not able to meet our legal and regulatory obligations. .

With the new bus we can keep the bus running for the serviceable lifetime of the vehicle so long as we obtain sufficient volunteers.

Summary

In summary we are recovery from the Covid lockdown in terms of passenger numbers has settled at around 85% but in the current climate of ever rising costs we have to manage our running costs and regrettably this means ceasing poorly supported services. The new bus will allow us to continue for several years so long as more volunteers come forward from the community.

We should all do all we can to encourage use of the bus, it is really still a case of 'use it or lose it'.

The High Suffolk Community Transport Management Committee