



Westmorland
& Furness
Council

Bus Service Improvement Plan 2024





“By investing in strategic transport infrastructure, we will enhance connectivity, foster economic growth, and establish Westmorland and Furness as a great place to live, work, and thrive”

Introduction

This is the third Bus Service Improvement Plan for the area, but the first for Westmorland & Furness Council, following Local Government Re-organisation in 2023, where it replaced part of the previous Cumbria County Council area.

It sets out the Council's aims and aspirations in relation to bus services in their area, and for the first time there is also funding available to the Council to help meet some of these aspirations.

It is designed to work in partnership with the Enhanced Partnership plan developed jointly by the Council with its operators; stakeholders; and partners, including neighbouring Cumberland Council, to drive improvements in services forward.

This document is intended to be a “live” document, and the Council welcomes feedback to its proposals, which can be used to influence our future plans.

Foreword

“Westmorland and Furness Council is committed to supporting the provision of bus services that offer a high-quality experience for users, including good connections between town centres and surrounding areas. However, the delivery of commercial bus services, across our large, predominantly rural, and sparsely populated geography is challenging. Close working with our partners, including commercial and community-based service operators is essential, and we continue to collaborate to deliver against our commitment.

The £1.7m funding awarded to the Council as part of the national Bus Service Improvement Plan Plus (BSIP+) programme for 2024/25, is supporting this work and represents a significant step towards enhancing bus provision across Westmorland and Furness. Alongside our wider programme of planned bus service improvements, as set out in this Bus Service Improvement Plan, it will support us in helping people live independently for as long as possible in a sustainable way, with access to work, health facilities, education, and social networks. Through the provision of more frequent, enhanced commercial and community-based services we aim to enable residents and visitors to choose the bus as their preferred way to travel and create more enjoyable, sustainable journeys for all.

The council has fully taken into account the results of the public consultation held in March and April this year, as well as additional anecdotal material, and has used this to inform how best to spend the funding.”



Councillor Neil Hughes

Cabinet Member for Transport and Regulatory Services



Council Policies and Aspirations

The Westmorland & Furness Council Plan sets out our vision, values and priorities. Our vision is for Westmorland & Furness to be a great place to live, work and thrive. We have set out priorities set out in the plan to help show how we will achieve this vision. Our priorities include reducing inequality through improving access to jobs, education and services and working towards ensuring our area is carbon net zero; improved bus provision can help achieve our vision and meet these priorities.

The Council Plan Delivery Framework 2024/25 sets out our main focus for the current financial year. It has ten delivery themes, with connections focussing on transport. The framework states that the council will provide bus support in 2024/25, by allocating £1.7m of Bus Service Improvement Plan Plus funding to improve local bus services through local operators. This will allow operators to reinstate and maintain routes and improve services to benefit our communities, businesses and visitors.

Westmorland & Furness Council's transport policies are set within our **Local Transport Plan – the Cumbria Transport Infrastructure Plan (2022 – 2037)**. The plan sets the following transport vision:

“In 2037 Cumbria will be one of the best-connected rural geographies in the UK. Embracing innovation and opportunity; clean growth and decarbonising transport networks will be integral to a growing, inclusive economy where our communities will be able to access opportunities, services, education and leisure facilities. Cumbria will be a destination of choice, where people choose to live, visit and work.”

The plan aims to achieve this through three objectives:

- Clean and Healthy Cumbria: promoting active travel and digital infrastructure as enablers of inclusive growth, supporting the health and wellbeing of our communities, and decarbonisation.
- Connected Cumbria: promoting improved transport networks to connect our places and support opportunities for businesses and communities.
- Community Cumbria: promoting integrated, affordable, safe and accessible approaches to transport to support opportunity and improve social inclusion.

Current Offer to Passengers (Where we are now)

The Commercial bus network in the Westmorland & Furness Council area has largely been maintained for the last twenty years, albeit with some reductions in service frequency. In the tourist area of the Lake District there has been a major expansion of services, with better frequencies; longer operating seasons, plus earlier and later buses. This however contrasts with the limited service provided in most rural areas outside the main tourist region, including to a number of larger settlements which due to the great distances to main population hubs, often through areas of very sparse population, typically have no daily service or public transport links for work. Many of these areas saw a major growth in services and therefore connectivity between 1998 and 2014, so were greatest impacted upon when the Rural Bus Subsidy Grant funding ended.





There are a number of thriving Community Bus operators in our area who have stepped in where the Commercial market has been unable to deliver a service. It is vital that we maintain the good work these groups have done, whilst meeting our aspirations for significant improvement in bus connectivity, such as the provision of frequent, six day a week services, and providing for journeys to work, education and health services.

The area has not been impacted as much as many other areas of the UK by the effects of the COVID pandemic as there was less reliance on commuting by bus, but concessionary passholders (ENCTS), who were vital for the viability of many rural routes, have been much slower to return to the bus than working age and young people.

There are currently no electric or alternative fuel vehicles operating in the Westmorland & Furness Council area. The high costs of introduction and low profit margins available in the area make it difficult to deliver this important change. There are also a large number of long distance rural routes in our area which are less suitable for a switch to electric buses.

Bids for funding for a switch to electric buses in Barrow in 2020 and 2023, the second linked to introduction on a route in the Central Lake District, were both unsuccessful, but the Council will continue to work with operators to seek support for a move to the use of more sustainable fuels.

The £2 fare scheme has been a major incentive for more bus travel in the area, where long travel distances and limited population have led to higher fares. The scheme however does not offer any incentive to the regular traveller in towns where fares and weekly season tickets, were already at this level.

Like many areas of the UK the area has been affected by unreliability due to staff sickness and shortages meaning services are dropped at short notice, whilst delays in vehicle replacement and shortage of parts have also meant services being dropped due to vehicles shortages. Both are affecting passenger confidence and ability to attract extra passengers onto the network.

Whilst there are currently no Realtime displays at bus stops, the majority of marked stops have bus timetable displays, which carry QR codes which link smartphones to the operator app which has this information. However not all passengers have smartphones and poor reception can mean information is not available, so introduction of a system at key stops is an aspiration.

Timetable posters are stop specific to key destinations for simplicity for potential passengers and designed in a large print, to best meet the needs of the occasional traveller.

It is recognised that the interchange facilities in major towns are inadequate compared with those in similar sized towns in other areas of the Country. They offer a poor first view of the towns for visitors and do not help to encourage greater use of public transport. There is no bus station in Barrow, whilst Penrith and Kendal bus stations are unmanned, as are the interchanges in Windermere and Ambleside. None have fully enclosed waiting areas, only Penrith has toilets, and none have real-time information displays to update passengers on delays and disruption to services.



Improvement Programme for 2024/25

(Where we are going)

Improvements have already been made in Sedbergh, Kirkby Stephen, Grange-over-Sands, Alston, and Windermere. Extra services have been provided at peak times for workers travelling from Barrow to Windermere to improve access for staff to hospitality businesses.

The frequency of the service between Penrith and Keswick has been increased from every 60 to 30 minutes, to make bus-rail connections with the West Coast Mainline at Penrith more attractive for local people and visitors. The frequency of service between Carlisle and Penrith has also been increased from every 60 to every 30 minutes and there are aspirations to agree a faster more direct route into Carlisle city centre, to make travel by bus a more attractive option.

Plans for the future include potential further improvements of the service between.

- Kirkby Stephen to Penrith via Appleby.

Better links from

- Arnside to Kendal;
- Greystoke to Penrith;
- Coniston to Ulverston.

Also Improvements to

- The frequency of the town services within Barrow, especially in the evening and on Sundays;
- Daytime frequencies from Kendal to Westmorland Hospital via Oxenholme station.



Ambitions and Proposals 2025-2030 and Beyond (Where we want to be)

Better and more frequent bus services will make travelling by bus more attractive, providing people with more choice for how they travel and encouraging mode shift from the car. An increase in people travelling by bus would benefit everyone who travels by reducing congestion; this is particularly an issue in the Lake District, where queuing traffic impacts both the visitors who bring revenue and employment to the area, and residents accessing jobs, services and going about their day. Reducing traffic volumes would improve journey times and reliability, meaning more journeys can be run with the same number of vehicles.

This could be complemented with new or enhanced infrastructure, such as bus priority measures at key locations which reduce service delay and improve reliability. This, alongside improvement to walking, cycling and wheeling routes would encourage integrated sustainable transport journeys from home to destination.

We however need to do this in a cost-effective way. Routes in the Council areas could struggle to be sustainable on a commercial basis, due to the sparse population and low starting point. So the Council will need to provide investment to kick-start improvements, and also longer term small scale financial support to sustain the network.

Timetabled bus services are not always be the right solution for some rural areas, and investment in measures such as Demand Responsive Transport can provide more financially sustainable solutions. Park and Ride, could also be considered at key locations, including tourist destinations, to help reduce the impact of traffic congestion, but providing the required extra parking and bus priority measures in these areas will be challenging.



Long Term Ambitions for Services

In the Council area the following specific aims are identified:

- Reduce the age profile of the bus fleet to offer more attractive and comfortable services to passengers;
- Move to an electric bus fleet to help achieve our decarbonisation ambitions;
- Improved bus station facilities in Penrith and Kendal, with fully enclosed waiting areas, Real Time information screens, toilets (Kendal), possibly staffed;
- Improved waiting facilities at Barrow relocated to a more convenient safer location and Ulverston with larger enclosed waiting shelters with Real Time Information Screens at both;
- More information available at key locations about next services and any delays or disruption.

Services

On main routes in Barrow

- 05:00 to 23:00 Monday to Saturday (for better access to work and connections);
- 09:00 to 20:00 (for better links for social activities and work);
- At least every 10 minutes in the daytime on Monday to Saturday to offer a better option to private transport;
- At least every 30 minutes early morning / late evening / Sundays.

In Kendal

- 08:00 to 19:00 Monday to Thursday (for better access to work and connections)
- 08:00 to 23:00 Friday and Saturday (for better links for social activities and work)
- 09:00 to 18:00 Sunday
- At least every 20 minutes in the daytime on Monday to Saturday to offer a better option to private transport for access to key services
- At least every hour evenings Monday to Saturday
- At least every hour Sundays

Main routes between larger towns

- At least every 30 minutes daytime Monday to Saturday
- At least hourly 09:00 to 19:00 Sundays
- Faster journey times with a mix of direct Express services and slower services serving more villages.

To offer better access for work and an attractive alternative to Private motoring to reduce the dependence in the car, through fast frequent services linking to hubs for onwards transport by bus or train as appropriate.

Rural Areas off main roads

- Mix of Monday to Saturday daytime Demand Responsive and weekly bus services as appropriate for demand.

This would involve significant Capital investment to deliver and potentially long-term revenue funding to maintain.

Appendix : Results of the 2023 Public Transport Satisfaction Survey

	Total	Answered	Very Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Neither	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied	Satisfied	Neither	Unsatisfied
Overall	1839	1307 (71%)	363 (28%)	532 (41%)	184 (14%)	129 (10%)	99 (8%)	895 (68%)	184 (14%)	228 (17%)
Local	1297	1068 (82%)	249 (23%)	447 (42%)	163 (15%)	114 (11%)	95 (9%)	696 (65%)	163 (15%)	209 (20%)
Visitor	469	239 (51%)	114 (48%)	85 (36%)	21 (9%)	15 (6%)	4 (2%)	199 (83%)	21 (9%)	19 (8%)
Barrow	298	246 (83%)	55 (22%)	109 (44%)	42 (17%)	26 (11%)	14 (6%)	164 (67%)	42 (17%)	40 (16%)
Kendal	323	174 (54%)	47 (27%)	103 (59%)	15 (9%)	6 (3%)	3 (2%)	150 (86%)	15 (9%)	9 (5%)
Penrith	347	197 (57%)	49 (25%)	115 (58%)	20 (10%)	8 (4%)	5 (3%)	164 (83%)	20 (10%)	13 (7%)
Men	560	364 (65%)	82 (23%)	156 (43%)	60 (16%)	41 (11%)	25 (7%)	238 (65%)	60 (16%)	66 (18%)
Women	940	682 (73%)	159 (23%)	281 (41%)	102 (15%)	72 (11%)	68 (10%)	440 (65%)	102 (15%)	140 (21%)
ENCTS	692	507 (73%)	137 (27%)	188 (37%)	62 (12%)	63 (12%)	57 (11%)	325 (64%)	62 (12%)	120 (24%)
Non-ENCTS	803	537 (67%)	103 (19%)	247 (46%)	101 (19%)	50 (9%)	36 (7%)	350 (65%)	101 (19%)	86 (16%)
Under 35	184	148 (80%)	28 (19%)	86 (58%)	21 (14%)	8 (5%)	5 (3%)	114 (77%)	21 (14%)	13 (9%)
35-54	307	200 (65%)	44 (22%)	78 (39%)	35 (18%)	24 (12%)	19 (10%)	122 (60%)	35 (18%)	43 (22%)
55-64	316	207 (66%)	36 (17%)	90 (43%)	46 (22%)	21 (10%)	14 (7%)	126 (61%)	46 (22%)	35 (17%)
65+	693	491 (71%)	133 (27%)	182 (37%)	61 (12%)	60 (12%)	55 (11%)	315 (64%)	61 (12%)	115 (23%)



Translation Services

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